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HUMOROUS ENGLISH

BOOKS BY EVAN ESAR

Esar's Comic Dictionary

Dictionary of Humorous Quotations

The Humor of Humor

Humorous English

H U M O R O U S E N G L I S H



*a guide to comic usage,
jocular speech and writ-
ing, and witty grammar*

by E V A N E S A R

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FOREWORD

In the unceasing stream of books on the English language, there is no book dealing with its humor. A little volume published in 1840, *Comic English Grammar*, may be considered an exception though even this trifle made superficial mention of only a handful of subjects. Every now and then some passing fashion of linguistic wit or slip is discussed in print, like fractured French or the dropped prefix. But apart from the irrepressible pun and a few conspicuous types like the limerick and spoonerism, none of the essential divisions of humorous English has ever been studied.

Why our linguists should view English as a serious medium only seems a mystery. After all, language is the chief instrument of humor. Besides, linguistics is a science of growing specialization, and its experts work within limited areas like phonology or semantics. Why then do they ignore the rich wide world of verbal comedy?

Perhaps it would be more valid to lay the blame at the door of the humorist rather than the linguist. In either case, it was the neglect of humorous lexicography that drove me years ago to prepare a comprehensive *Comic Dictionary* where words would be given amusing and satiric meanings instead of their customary serious definitions. It is the continuous indifference to the study of

humorous English that has pushed me to project the present work.

Many a misconception is due to such neglect, like the identity of wordplay with punning. The pun comprises only one out of many classes of wordplay, and is mainly concerned with the sounds of words. Non-punning wordplay depends on the meanings of words, their spellings, or their usage and arrangement. I have devoted separate chapters to the major classes of such wordwit, like Synonymics and Antonymics, and have described many non-punning types under each of them.

The blank in our investigation of humorous English may be explained in part by curious caprices of history. For centuries Latin has been the basis of our study of English usage, and its favored status led us to Anglicize the harsh-sounding Latin names for grammatical elements like preposition, adjective and conjugation. On the other hand, most of the Greek names for rhetorical comedy, though no more cacophonous, failed to gain admission into everyday English. This preference for ancient grammatical elements to humorous ones has not deterred us from playing freely with verbal humor but has diverted us from examining it.

It would be idle to speculate on our loss, but incalculable it must be. The ancient Greeks knew a great deal about linguistic comedy and used it with striking effect in life and literature. The best specimens of Attic salt which have come down to us from Plutarch, Aelian and others transcend the wit of our times. Though less scientific-minded and more philosophical than we are, these witty-wise people investigated categories of humor. Yet our modern scientists, with the exception of Freud, are above such experimental methods.

Aristotle himself tells us how he classified jests, a work unfortunately lost in the transit of time. Nor was the

great philosopher disdainful of putting humor into practice. In his work on *Rhetoric*, he cites and approves Gorgias' judgment that, in oratorical controversy, you should destroy your opponent's seriousness with jests and his jests with seriousness.

Almost two thousand years later the ancient figures of rhetorical comedy were adapted into English. They excited Shakespeare and his contemporaries, kindling the brilliance of Elizabethan drama. Then Puritanism put the light of humor out. When it was finally rekindled, the study of its techniques was all but forgotten.

Humorous English goes back to the early beginnings of our language. The first jestbook in English literature, *A Hundred Merry Tales*, was published in 1526. This collection was known to Shakespeare for in *Much Ado About Nothing* he has Benedick charge Beatrice with stealing her wit from it. Oddly enough, the first jest in this first jestbook is a punning story, apart from several other specimens of linguistic humor. These deal more with speech blunders than with verbal cleverness because in olden days the slip was more prevalent than the quip.

With the rise of widespread literacy their relative positions were reversed so that in modern times we encounter verbal wit much more often than comic misusage. During the past century, spurred by Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, another profound advance appeared in the making. This is the playground of verbal nonsense where slips turn witty and wit slippery. It is no accident that two of our most popular comic-strip creators—Al Capp and Walt Kelly—indulge in verbal nonsense with fresh grammatical freedom.

In the title of this book, *Humorous English*, the adjective is as important as the noun. My problem was whether to apply comic techniques to the broad divisions

of language or to approach the subject from the opposite direction. Since we are all more familiar with the elements of English than humor, I chose to build this work on a grammatical arrangement mostly.

Mostly, but not wholly. In a few cases, as in the chapter on Nameplay, I have resorted to a non-linguistic class because it is more adaptable to forms of humor than language. Some of the other chapters too will seem strange to grammarians—Negative English, Questionable English, Numerical English, Novelty English.

I have taken the liberty of introducing the term *linguicomed*y because there is no word in English for language in relation to humor. The term is not limited to English since features common to many languages give linguicomedy certain universal qualities. Conversely, every language reflects the comiculture of the people who speak it, and its special grammatical peculiarities stamp it with a humor of its own. Even the same language, if spoken by peoples widely apart, creates differences in linguicomedy, as the British and Americans are well aware.

Unlike the analyst of humor who relies on hypotheses, I have limited myself to the facts of humorous English. My method has been to illustrate the scores of linguistic types by sayings mainly rather than stories, and by only a few samples in each case. I have done so not because brevity is the soul of wit nor because, in the words of a less-known proverb, it is wise to leave a jest when it pleases you best. The truth is that linguistic phenomena can be understood more readily by the use of witticisms than by stories which are grounded on situation. However, when and where jocular categories are introduced, they are always exemplified by pert and pertinent stories.

Another reason for this procedure is more personal.

Daily for many years have I practiced the art of epigrammar. In the perishable print of our daily press and in the more durable form of book publication have appeared thousands of my minted sayings. Hundreds of these sparklers, among the better wit of my betters, are sprinkled throughout the text as illustrative matter. If among the glitter and glow of these sayings, the precious jewels are few and the artificial gems many, it is well to remember that my primary need is illustration rather than selection. Nevertheless, I have borrowed enough choice specimens from quotation literature to satisfy the fastidious reader.

A parenthetical word here about the craft of cutting epigrams and comic definitions. My purpose was not to instruct the reader in the tricks of this trade. All the same, many a useful tip will be found in the explanations of different types of wordwit. With a little practice, the lessons are not too difficult to learn, always provided that the aptitude is there.

From the conventional way English is taught in our schools, one would never realize what a superb instrument of humor it is. Or that its teachers and students have a sense of humor. Whatever other improvements the teaching of our language may need, no reform would enliven it as much as linguicomedie. This can be done by the plentiful use of comic illustration since, as this book shows, every fundamental concept of English can be given amusing examples. The reverse approach is even more desirable—to give the examples first and then stimulate the minds of students by having them discover for themselves the underlying relationships. Laugh as you learn is a good rule everywhere, and no branch of learning needs it more than the study of our language.

Our playful imagination cannot be compressed within the rigid confines of non-humorous English, but must

be forever expanding our linguistic boundaries. We learn at school that words are spelled one way, but there really are a dozen ways, as we discover in the chapter on Spelling and elsewhere. We learn that there are only three genders—masculine, feminine and neuter—but the chapter on Gender proves otherwise. Every element of our language is steadily being stretched into shapes undreamed of by grammarians.

Language and humor are among the chief achievements of man. Having been created out of his social and psychological needs, they have no existence apart from his mind and activities. They separate him from his fellow-animals, with the gulf constantly widening as he adapts them to his evolving environment. Language enables us to build the present upon the past into a higher cumulative future. And humor enables us to preserve society by correcting through ridicule man's unwholesome departures from his fellowmen.

As we push the frontiers of ignorance further and further back, we expose the convergence of what we once believed to be separate paths of inquiry. Just as biology and chemistry join in biochemistry to reveal new unifying processes, so language and humor join in linguicomedry to reveal unexpected similarities. They seem to be directed toward each other and, according to the basic formulas here described, have many characteristics in common. Some of the categories even unfold mathematical relations. We find verbal addition and subtraction in the play of prefixes and suffixes, verbal division in split words and interposed phrases, verbal multiplication in the repeating and grouping of words.

Even beyond this interrelation we sense an affinity between linguicomedry and the tragicomedry of other arts and sciences. Not only do mathematical relations pervade linguicomedry, but antithesis and counterpoint

are as fundamental to it as to music. Thus are we tempted to surmise that the forces which give vent to man's deepest wells of feeling and highest flights of imagination may be related like the linkage of atoms in a molecule. And perhaps they are set toward some ultimate unity incomprehensible to man, their creator, orbiting like the earth-home of man himself toward some undisclosed goal.

EVAN ESAR

ALPHABETICS

Humor dealing with the English alphabet and its individual letters is called alphabeticism. It has existed ever since the rise of the English language of the fifth century A.D. from a low Dutch dialect spoken by the Anglo-Saxons. Other languages, with alphabets much older than ours, are interwoven with similar wit, the 119th Psalm being an example of ancient Hebrew alphabeticism in the form of abecedarian verse.

W. C. Fields, the fabulous American zany, was once asked about his schooling. "I spent all my four years in public school," he explained. "During the last week of that fourth year the teacher said to me: 'And now—the alphabet.' That discouraged me, so I quit."

In my *Comic Dictionary* I have defined the word *alphabet* variously as a letter carrier, as the greatest bet ever made, and as something that contains more letters than a mailbox. But the alphabet itself creates endless comedy, embracing all 26 letters and many more than 26 distinct types of humorous English.

The letter *a*, for example, involves a pun when it is defined as a letter that's always written in haste. But it represents non-punning caricature in the story about the vegetarian who always dined on apples, apricots and asparagus because his wife had taken a domestic science course and had quit after the first week.

Similarly, the letter *b* involves a repeating definition when it is explained as the beginning of every beginning. But the same letter is a matter of analogy in the saying that many of us are like the letter *b* because we are in debt without any valid reason.

The spectrum of alphabetics ranges all over English and its grammar. One species of humor is called *telephone alphabetics* because it occurs only over the phone. A recent case concerns a man who, exasperated with the telephone operator, shouted: "Z! Z! Zander! No, not C! ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ!"

Another case tells about a lawyer who wanted to send a telegram by phone. When he got Western Union, he said, "I want to send a telegram to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr." The girl at the other end of the wire asked, "D as in David?"

For all that she was not as ignorant as the woman who was giving her address over the phone to a department store salesgirl. "Apartment Q," she said, "Q like in cucumber."

Abecedarian wit is another species of alphabetics in which words, lines of verse, or divisions of prose are arranged in ABCD order. For generations children were seriously taught via juvenile alphabets—A is an Archer, B a butcher, C a cow—while their fathers playfully pursued sophisticated verse alphabets like *The Barfly's Abecedary*:

A is for Alcohol, Absinthe and Ale
B is for Beer and Bourbon on sale;
C is for Claret, Cocktails and Corks . . .

By the end of the last century English abecedaries reached their peak in inventive variations, some constructed on a single rhyme, some limited to proper

names, and others alliterative in every word. They have been largely superseded by the ABC's which are usually capitalized, epigrammatic, and limited to the first three letters of the alphabet.

The ABC of safety: Always Be Careful.

The ABC of parenthood: Always Be Consistent.

The ABC of shoppers: Always Bring Cash.

ABC's are no strangers to advertising. In recent years enormous sums were spent in advertising one brand of cigarettes by such alphabetics: ABC—Always Buy Chesterfields.

Such wit is also the basis of sayings and stories in conjunction with other letters.

We wouldn't worry so much about the ABC's of taxes if we could only get the X's and V's with which to pay them.

A man was earnestly trying to impress a fellow-passenger on a train, but the unwilling listener seemed rather dull of understanding. Somewhat annoyed, he raised his voice and exclaimed, "It's as plain as ABC!" "Yes," replied the other, "but I am DEF."

Since we learn the alphabet in childhood, alphabetics is prominently present in juvenile English.

A little lass showed off her knowledge to a lad by reciting the alphabet backwards. "Now say it sideways," he challenged.

A businessman, telephoning an associate at home, was answered by a child. "Tell him that Mr. Richards called," the man said. "Wait till I get a pencil and paper," answered the child. Then, "How do you spell Richards?" "R-i-c-h-" the caller began. "Wait a minute," interrupted the child. "How do you make an R?"

On a children's quiz show the emcee asked a youngster, "What is it? It's a man's best friend, and the word begins with *d*." The lad thought for a moment, then the answer leaped out. "Dame," he cried.

A stock situation in juvenile alphabetics introduces a teacher or mother who tries to teach a child the alphabet. She asks, "What letter comes after *A*?" The child answers, "All the rest of them." Or she asks, "What letter comes after *G*?" The child answers, "Whiz." When she asks, "What letter comes after *O*?", the reply is "Yeah." And the question, "What comes after *T*?" brings the inevitable response, "*V*."

Many an adult pastime of past times is at present fit only for children. One of these is *alphabetic verse*, a form word-bound by the most narrow phonetic device.

We NV not a bachelor,
He leads an MT life;
Yet he deserves no PT for
He ought to CK wife.

Another is the *alphabetic riddle* of which hundreds of specimens have been contrived.

Q. Why is the letter D like a brat? A. Because it makes ma mad.

Unlike such juvenile alphabetics, the *alphabetism* is a witty saying centering on a letter.

The best way to end wars is with the letter *s*.

Some of the hardest words in English are spelled with *e*'s.

An oyster never gets stewed except during the *R* months.

Sometimes two letters are juggled, the addition making the saying more deft.

A diplomat always has to watch his appease and accuse. Alphabetically speaking, it's the eyes of a woman that disturb the ease of a man.

Alphabetic definitions are simply playful explanations of individual letters. *A* is another thing that makes men mean, *B* is something that turns all games into ball-games, *C* is a letter of credit, and so on.

The *laffabet* or *laughabet* is an abc arrangement of all the letters of the alphabet, with each letter being given a clever definition:

A is the capital of America; B is the bee in every bonnet; C is something you require if you want to write correctly; D is another thing always found indoors; E is the end of time; F is a letter of reference; G is something that's soft in gelatin but hard in pudding; H is the only essential part of faith, hope and charity; I is invisible yet never out of sight; J is the first of January; K is something you find in kittens but not in cats; L is a Cockney's idea of the lower world; M begins marriage and ends freedom; N is a letter in transit; O is another thing that's always in doubt; P is a letter that's always in place; Q is what quarrels always begin with; R is a letter more in sorrow than in anger; S is something that makes needles needless; T is the difference between here and there; U is another thing that's always part of a pun; V is the center of gravity; W is a letter that makes ill will; X is an unknown quantity that makes a pensive woman expensive; Y is the only thing that can turn a lad into a lady; Z is something always found in front of zoos.

The language in which individual letters of the alphabet represent different words is called *alphabetese*. Such a style is often used in conjunction with numbers and genuine words. Some letters act as verbs (C, R), some

as nouns (J, T), others as pronouns (I, U). The most common letter in alphabetese is O, standing for expressions of surprise, pain, joy and other feelings.

The following one-sided conversation was overheard on the phone: "L.O., O.K., O.I.C., U.R.?, Y?, O, O.G., I.C., O.K."

Frank Moore Colby, one of America's finest essayists and aphorists, quoted a writer of the early 1900s who taunted his generation with too much reading: "They even put the letters of the alphabet in their soup."

Most *alphabet soup*, so-called from the tiny flat noodles in the shape of letters, furnishes little food for thought and satire. Typical is the gag told about a mother who spilled some alphabet soup, so hot words passed between her and her son. Later she asked him if he wanted a second bowl of alphabet soup. "No," he said, "not another word."

When the Roosevelt New Deal came in during the thirties, it turned on a flood of governmental agencies. Their unwieldy names were abbreviated to NRA, ORP, and the like, thus giving rise to a stream of alphabet soup. A wit of the time declared that, although we have more alphabetical agencies than are necessary, the situation is actually better than it appears. "As long as everything from ABC to XYZ," he said, "takes second place to USA, we are OK."

Since that time English has often been dunked into alphabet soup by humorous writers. Recently an office girl complained at lunch, "I've been a file clerk too long." "What makes you think so?" asked her fellow-worker. "This alphabet soup," said the clerk. "I just found myself eating the letters in alphabetical order."

The *alphabetic pun* serves up a wider choice of provisions than alphabet soup though whether it tickles the palate more is a moot point. Shakespeare played with

almost every punnable letter, and ranks with the leading alphabetic punsters in English. Although the fashion of such wit has died out, the practice hasn't.

A friend once remarked to Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the dramatist, "It is strange that your surname hasn't an O prefixed to it, since you come from such an illustrious Irish family." "That's quite true," agreed Sheridan. "And no family has a better right to it. We owe everybody."

In *alphabetic addition* a letter or letters are joined to a word to form another word. It is commonly found in riddles, definitions and typographical errors. R, for instance, can turn ice into rice, make a rink out of ink, and change a he into a her. Puns make use of this device, also comic cockneyese through the prefixion of an *h*.

Alphabetic subtraction, the counterpart of alphabetic addition, is equally prevalent and varied. An emcee who couldn't sound the *th*, introduced a speaker as a very wise tinker.

The written alphabet originated in picture symbols which eventually became letters and then the process continued toward mathematical symbols and humorous effects. Thus, although the letters of the alphabet normally represent units of words, they may also denote verbal and non-verbal symbols.

The best-known tale of this type concerns Einstein who was asked by an interviewer for his secret of success. The great scientist is reported to have replied: "If A is success in life, I should say that the formula for success is A equals X plus Y plus Z, with X standing for work and Y for play." "But what is Z?" asked the interviewer. "Oh that?" replied Einstein smiling, "that is keeping your mouth shut."

Alphabetic symbols of another sort are involved in

the story of the lad who had brought his report card home from school. But before doing so he had cunningly erased the C's and D's, and had upped them to A's and B's. His parents signed it with mingled surprise and pleasure. The next day the lad brought the report card home again and proudly exclaimed, "My teacher wants you to see the extra mark she gave me." The parents read the brief notation written across the top: "Forgery—A."

A different note was struck in a safety road-sign. It was decorated with musical symbols and read: "Life's musical score—C sharp, or B flat!"

The letter X leads all others as an alphabetic symbol in humor. In mathematics X is usually the symbol for an unknown quantity, but in business it stands for the signature of a person who cannot write. Fred Allen combined these when, in a mathematical problem, he wrote: "Let X represent the signature of my father."

The letter X also figures in English as a figurative device, as in the abbreviation Xmas for Christmas. Oddly enough, this adoption of X, the initial letter of Christ's name in Greek, has never been extended by analogy to other English words like Xian, Xendom, Xianity. One wit resorted to this device when referring to the king of Denmark as Xian X.

Many a wordplayer has tried his hand and tired his readers with verse or prose limited to a single vowel. Since *e* is the most common of all the vowels, such pieces are most often restricted to it. Sample:

We feel extreme feebleness when we seek perfect excellence here. We well remember men everywhere err. Even when Eden's evergreen trees sheltered Eve, the serpent crept there. . . .

Short verses, exclusively confined to words with a single vowel, have been attempted but none too success-

fully. Here is an above-average stanza giving the reader an eyeful:

Idling I sit in this mild twilight dim,
 Whilst birds, in wild swift vigils, circling skim.
 Light wings in sighing sink till, rising bright,
 Night's Virgin Pilgrim swims in vivid light.

The alphabetic reverse of the exclusive vowel is the *lipogram*. This form of composition embraces all writings from which one of the letters of the alphabet, usually a vowel, is intentionally omitted. During ancient and medieval times scholars used to vie with one another showing off their linguistic cunning by composing lipograms, especially in verse, but nowadays they are seldom committed.

If yo think yo don't amont to mch, see what happens
 when we leave yo ot.

Recently a mock lipogram appeared as a notice in a large motel, evidently as a means of keeping the employees on the job:

YOU ARX IMPORTANT

Whxn you arx txmptxd to takx a day off without notifying your managxr, and you think that thx ab-sxncx of onx pxrson won't makx much diffxrncx, you placx your managxr in thx samx position as a fxllo trying to typx with onx kxy missing. Hx can makx substitutions just as wx havx donx, but thx rxslt is nxvxr thx samx as whxn hx's working with thx right pxopl on thx right jobs.

Another specimen of lipogrammar is cleverly put in the form of a riddle or problem:

How quickly can you find out what is so unusual about this paragraph? It looks so ordinary that you would think that nothing was wrong with it at all and, in fact, nothing is. But it is unusual. Why? If you study it and think about it you may find out, but I'm not going to assist you in any way. You must do it without coaching. No doubt, if you work at it, it will dawn on you. Who knows? Go to work now and try your skill.

Every letter of the alphabet contributes comedy to alphabetics. *E* has always been the favorite of word-players because it rates the highest frequency. The letter *P* is the favorite of alliterators from Shakespeare and Dickens to Peter Piper, the juvenile classic on *Practical Principles of Plain and Perfect Pronunciation*.

The letter *k* plays an odd role because it is the *sine qua non* of American foottowns—Podunk, Kalamazoo, Kankakee, Hoboken, etc. Even more curious is the old American comic tradition, going back to Artemus Ward, of replacing the hard *c* with *k*. George Herriman called his classic comic strip *Krazy Kat*; the *Ku Klux Klan* was always issuing klarion kalls for krusades; and our advertising signs and brand names have for generations employed it alliteratively, as in Krispy Krackers, Kiddy Kars, Kwality Kut Klothes. In 1960, when *Time* magazine reported Admiral Burke's intention to spell Communism with a *K* following the spelling of Khrushchev and the Kremlin, it was swamped with komic korrespondence of this kind. As Louise Pound, the American folkspeech authority, once wrote, "There is no mistaking the kall of *k* over our kountry, our kurious kontemporary kraving for it, and its konspicious use in the klevor koinages of kommerce."

A history of humorous English could well be written

around the individual letters of the alphabet. By way of brief example, let us take the third vowel, sometimes called the *alphabetic eye*. During the great Elizabethan days when the English language was blooming like a hothouse plant, every writer was a verbalist, and word-play was the standard sport of literary men. A favorite pun was the word *I*, which was often written for the affirmative *aye* and interplayed with its homonym *eye*. In *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare could not resist dragging in the triple pun though the scene is sheer pathos as Juliet suddenly learns that Romeo is dead:

Hath Romeo slain himself? Say that but "I,"
And that bare vowel "I" shall poison more
Than the death-darting eye of cockatrice;
I am not I, if there be such an "I;"
Or these eyes shut, that make thee answer "I."

The interchange of *I*, *aye* and *eye* has long been a source of wordwit, especially in politics. Logrolling has been described as an *aye* for an *aye*; and the Speaker of the House is said to be in peril when every member on the floor wants to get his *eye*.

The alphabetic eye in anecdotal jokelore helps us recall the past. One famous specimen involves two of the greatest punsters in English though, apart from its association with them, it is hardly worth reviving. Thomas Hood was once asked if he were acquainted with Theodore Hook. "Oh, yes," punned the witty poet, "Hook and I are close associates."

Nowadays this vowel usually creates wordwit on egotism and vanity, often in comic definitions. An egotist has been defined as an *I* specialist, egomania as an incurable disease of the *I*'s, and conceit as a form of *I* strain.

SYLLABICS

Next to the letters of the alphabet, the basic components of words are syllables. These are the parts of words pronounced as units, each syllable consisting of a vowel alone or with one or more consonants. Oddly enough, the word *syllable* itself has three such units—*syl la ble*. And the name for dividing a word into such parts runs into even more—*syl lab i fi ca tion*.

Dictionaries sometimes differ on the syllabification of words, but there is one word on which they agree—*indivisible*. Yet after dividing it into separate syllables, they define it as not divisible.

The name applied to the art and science of syllable play, and the practice of its comedy, is syllabics. Like alphabetics, this branch of linguistic comedy is a complex and fertile field of humorous English.

Syllabics usually covers identical units of pronunciation.

Flat-ter-y seldom falls flat.

People who used to wish for an ire-less Ire-land now wish for a cow-like Mos-cow.

Often the interplay lies between related but not identical syllables.

Many a man yearns for se-cu-ri-ty without making any effort to se-cure it.

Sometimes unrelated syllables, or syllables of different spelling, play together, but their sounds are always similar.

A mock purist once said he liked to see cows in a pasture because pasteurized milk is known to be the safest.

There were two girls who roomed together, one of them very popular. She was not only being dated, she was being inundated. The other was unpopular, undated, and her life was a bed of neuroses.

Verbal effects of this sort are enriched by various techniques. Observe how *blending* gives point to a play on syllables.

A centenarian is a woman in her dotage or a man in his anecdotage.

In the following quotation from Irvin S. Cobb, the American humorist, the *syllabic alternative* turns on the use of a suffix:

You couldn't tell if she was dressed for an opera or an operation.

Other sayings and stories center on the use of prefixes.

An easy-going, half-educated businessman married a schoolteacher who was overeducated and inflexible. After a year or two of married life, their incompatibility was evident to all. One day a friend said to the husband, "You're too easily overcome by your wife's powers of diction." "Oh no," countered the unhappy man, "it's not her powers of diction. It's her power of contradiction."

The most prevalent species of syllabics is the *syllabism*, a comic saying involving the interplay between a word and one or two of its syllables. It is said of a beautiful showgirl that producers never offer her a part but instead offer her apartments.

Sometimes a syllabism refers to a syllable or syllables without mentioning them.

Some women get divorces on the grounds of incompatibility whereas others do so on just the first two syllables.

In most cases, however, it is the phonetic repetition that carries the clever effect.

If your home is unbearable, maybe you're the bear.

There is no one less candid than a candidate.

It takes more than age to make a personage out of a person.

The *disjunctive pun* is a matter of syllabic separation, the phonetic splitting of a word into two words having a different meaning.

A fishmonger's business makes him sell fish.

A malingerer isn't always full of sham pain.

Although epigrams are the favorite resort of the syllabism, other forms of English play with such sound effects. The long-time slogan of Old Gold cigarettes, "For a treat instead of a treatment," shows its use in advertising. And so do many advertising heads, like this recent one: "How to Take the Grunt Out of a Disgruntled Customer."

The evolution of the *personalism* throws light on the appeal of the syllabism as a popular species of epigram. The personalism is a twisted saying whose prototype is the proverb, "One man's meat is another man's poison." It pokes fun at the personal or individual quality that distinguishes one man from another. The earliest twists were all "poison" variations.

One man's mate is another man's poison.

One man's wit is another man's poison.

One man's fish is another man's *poisson*.

During the next period of its development the variations took off in different directions, like George S. Kaufman's quip: One man's Mede is another man's Persian.

One man's loss is another man's umbrella.

One man's drive is another man's funeral.

One man's stumbling block is another man's stepping stone.

The final stage converted the personalism into a syllabism, with the counterpoint always between a word and its opening syllable.

One woman's poise is another woman's poison.

One man's nerve is another man's nervousness.

One woman's sin is another woman's singularity.

At the opposite end of such wit lies the *syllable gag*, a verbal slip in which two unrelated words are confused due to some syllabic similarity.

A youngster went to the Public Library to borrow a book on pharmacy because he wanted to become a farmer.

A hillbilly woman said: "I want a divorce on the grounds of infidelity. The preacher says my husband is an infidel."

Sometimes a syllable gag suggests, in addition to its soundplay, a bit of self-satire. "I can't get along with my boyfriend lately," complained a teenager. "He ignores me, and if there's anything that makes me mad, it's ignorance."

A similar use of sillybles comes from a kindred spirit

who was married. "He called me an adult," she objected, "though he knows very well I've never committed adultery in my life."

The malapropose nature of these gags explains why they are usually perpetrated by women. An old lady finally met the vicar and whispered, "Tell me, what are those vicarious thrills I've been hearing about all my life?"

A gossip asked her new neighbor over the back fence, "Did you idolize your husband before you married him?" "No," replied her opposite number, "he was idle before I met him."

Comic definitions too form a special class of syllabic humor. One type explains a word or phrase by means of such interplay.

glamor girl. A girl who has more men than mentality.

winebibber. A man who talks with more claret than clarity.

professional reformer. One who is bent on getting the pie out of piety.

The syllabic definition sometimes defines a word in the form of a *double syllabism*.

night club. A place where they have taken the rest out of restaurant and put the din in dinner.

Another type is the *polysyllabic definition*. This may be defined in polysyllabic fashion as the lexicographical explanation of a word or phrase utilizing sesquipedalian jawbreakers like *polysyllabic*. It has always been the satiric weapon of witty verbalists. The best-known example is probably Winston Churchill's euphemism for a lie as a terminological inexactitude.

fish story. A piscatorial prevarication.

kiss. The anatomical juxtaposition of two orbicularis oris muscles in a state of contraction.

golf. A laborious endeavor to impel a diminutive sphere into an exiguous aperture with inadequate instruments.

Some of Dr. Johnson's definitions in his famous dictionary are classics of unintentional polysyllabic humor. He really meant to be helpful when he defined *network* as "anything reticulated and decussated at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections." And he was no less serious when he defined a *cough* as "a convulsion of the lungs, vellicated by some sharp serosity."

It was this pompous, learned literary style that made Johnsonese synonymous with polysyllabics. He wrote, "I have labored to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations." Yet more than anything else, this great English lexicographer and literary leader labored to clear it from plain and easy English.

Because of his ornate style Johnson to this day stands as the personification of big words. Oliver Goldsmith once said to him, "If you were to make little fishes talk, they would talk like whales." And Noah Webster, an even greater word-student than Johnson, said of him, "His style is a mixture of Latin and English, an intolerable composition of Latinity and affected smoothness."

Polysyllabic definitions are one feature of polysyllabicity, a big word for the humorous use of big words. Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not give it this qualified meaning and lists it as a nonce-word, *polysyllabicity* is the specific term for the comic use of big words. Sometimes its practice is intentional, as in humorese where *emolument* is employed for *wages*, or *honorarium* for *tip*. And sometimes it is unintentional, as in officialese where long words fill up long sentences which fill up long directives which fill up long filing cabinets.

The learned lexicographer Henry Watson Fowler, whose *Modern English Usage* is a modern classic, ridicules polysyllabic humor. He objects to the facetious writing of olfactory organ for nose, osculatory for kissing, diminutive for small, and the like. It is unfortunate that Shakespeare, Dickens and Mark Twain, to mention only a trio who resorted to big words for playful purposes, lived before they could receive the benefit of Fowler's advice.

This celebrated grammarian uses pedantic humor interchangeably with polysyllabic humor, describing it as "the playful use of long and learned words which is a one-sided game boring the reader more than it pleases the writer." He lists such specimens as ablution, aforesaid, beverage, bivalve, caloric, cuticle, and digit. Fowler seems to confuse the valid use of learned words for comic purposes with the invalid use of learned words for pedantic purposes. The use of big words as a jocular device is known in all languages and times, and marks the writings of many or most leading humorists.

A jest of the 16th century ridicules this use of big words by scholars. Slightly changed to be better understood, the story reads: In the University of Oxford there was a scholar that delighted much to speak eloquent English and curious terms, and came to a cobbler with his shoes, which were peaked, to have them nailed, and said in this wise: "Cobbler, I pray thee, set two triangles and two semi-circles upon my subpedestals, and I shall pay thee for thy labor." The cobbler, because he understood him not half well, answered shortly and said: "Sir, your eloquence passes my intelligence. But I promise thee, if ye meddle with me, the nailing of thy shoes will cost thee three pence."

Like other polysyllabic witticisms, the *polysyllabic proverb* satirizes the use of big words.

A nomadic portion of the metamorphosed igneous or sedimentary deposit of the Proterozoic era accumulates no bryophytic plant life. (A rolling stone gathers no moss.)

The prudent avis which matutinally deserts the coziness of its abode will ensnare a vermiculate creature. (The early bird catches the worm.)

He who does not dissipate his competence by hebetudinous prodigality will not subsequently lament an exiguous inadequacy. (Waste not, want not.)

Ed Wynn, the American comedian who loves play-words, has a favorite etymology. He opposes the view of philologists that the word *discrepancy* is of Latin or Greek origin, contending that it is of German descent. The proof is, he claims, that the Germans are always asking, "Discrepancy Deutsch?"

Unlike this specimen, most humorous *word origins* are built upon the clever handling and combining of syllables.

The word *conscience*, the unscientific sense of right and wrong, is typical of syllabic etymology. It is supposed to come from *con*, meaning against, and *science*.

The most famous derivation of this kind is the legend that an English king, pleased by an excellent cut of beef at his table, drew out his sword and knighted it *Sir-loin*. The word really derives from the French *sur-loigne*, the upper end of the loin.

Other familiar specimens are also made up from syllabic interplay, like the dictionary-sanctioned etymology of woman as a bringer of woe, from *woe-plus-man*.

Although scholarly whimsy is scarcer than ice water in hades, it is found in humorous derivations. The origin of *virgin*, we are told, comes from *vir*, Latin for man, and *gin*, a trap. Hence, virgin means a mantrap.

By the same logic, a one-horse-town nowadays being something *unique*, it has been suggested that the word

comes from *unus*, meaning one, and *equus*, meaning horse.

Word origins of a syllabic kind, based on both accurate and mock division, are sometimes encountered in the most unlikely places. The humorous derivation of *wanton* is described in the works of serious lexicographers and etymologists, like Dr. Johnson and Ernest Weekly. It is also quaintly recorded in a 17th-century jestbook: "The word *wanton* was derived from those that *want one* to satisfy their desire. If so, I think there are no wantons, for till the world want men, they won't want only one."

In one form or another, syllabics amuses us all our lives, beginning with the riddles of childhood. The *syllabic conundrum* is an extensive brand of wordplay in which the answer lies in the first or last syllable of the answering word.

Q. What pets make the loudest noise? A. Trumpets.

The most popular of these riddles are the animal specimens, with the name of the animal usually forming the first syllable of the answer.

Q. What cow is easily frightened? A. A coward.

Q. What bull is always shot? A. The bullet.

Q. What pup is always moved with a string? A. A puppet.

A favorite tall story in American folklore during the last century was a switch on these riddles. "Talking of ants," said one of the storytellers, "we've got them as big as crabs out West. I've seen them fight with long horns which they use as lances, charging each other like savages." "They don't compare with the ants I saw in the Far East," said another man. "The natives have

trained them as beasts of burden. One of them could pull a ton load for miles with ease. They worked brilliantly, but every now and then they turned on their attendants and killed them." An incredulous listener thought this was drawing the long bow too far. "What sort of ants were they?" he asked. The speaker smiled and said, "Eleph-ants."

The *echo conundrum* belongs to juvenile riddles, with the answer being the last syllable or syllables of the last word.

Q. What gives a blind man the greatest delight. A. Light.

Behind the simple play of syllables lie techniques which are too subtle to be discussed outside a scholarly tome or too technical to interest anyone but a phonologist or humorologist. An example of one of these techniques is *anaptyxis*, the introduction of a vowel between two consonants. The comic definition of a platform as a platforum belongs to anaptyptic phonetics. And so does the witticism by punster Peter de Vries: "The things my wife buys at auction are keeping me baroque."

ABBREVESE

A pretentious young minister, who had been appointed to help the pastor of an important church, objected to his having been called "assistant minister." He wanted to be called "associate minister," and complained to an older colleague. The other listened quietly and then said, "My dear man, it doesn't really matter. Both titles will be abbreviated into ASS."

An American exporter, while visiting an account in Buenos Aires, requested his Argentine client to reserve special accommodations, food, etc., etc., etc., in the best hotel in a small historic town in the interior. Upon arriving, the American was shown his suite, and then taken to an adjoining room where three beautiful señoritas were waiting for him. "Who are these young ladies?" asked the American. His host smiled and said, "Señor, they are the three etceteras."

These stories illustrate abbrevese, a branch of humorous English embracing many species of wit and blunders.

To give a party on the q.t., don't get more than one qt.

It takes two pts. to make a qt., but authorities differ as to how many it takes to make a gal.

Explaining that A.M. after a professor's name means absent-minded typifies run-of-the-mill abbrevese. A more dexterous sample is illustrated by the Florida boos-

ter who always abbreviates California C.A.L.I.F. to represent *Come And Live In Florida*.

In recent years a new set of abbreviations has crept into popular comedy—IQ. A memo attached to a starlet's biography at one of the motion-picture studios reads: "Bust 42, IQ to match."

A visitor at the studio met her and later questioned the director about her talents as a star. "Don't let her conversation mislead you," the director explained. "There's more to her than meets the IQ."

The same letters may be turned into a double pun, as in describing a flirt whose sex appeal springs from her eye cue.

Both bona-fide and arbitrary abbreviations comprise this branch of comedy. A woman reported on her income tax return a deduction of \$20 for mice. When the Internal Revenue Service asked her to explain, she said, "Mice? Oh, that? I just didn't want to spell out miscellaneous."

A famous American physician visiting England was invited to inspect a leading London hospital. The American was curious about every detail and asked many questions. When looking over the charts he noticed the list of abbreviations: P for pneumonia, TB for tuberculosis, AP for angina pectoris, and so on. But the most common abbreviation, indicated by GOK, puzzled him. "You seem to have an epidemic of GOK," he said to one of the attending physicians. "We don't use this symbol in American hospitals. What is the disease?" "Oh," answered the other smiling, "when the staff can't diagnose the case, God Only Knows."

The *abbreviation boner* is generally a schoolboy slip in which an abbreviation is given a false but fitting answer. Youngsters have defined P.S., for example, as Police Station, Play Safe, Please Stop, as well as Public

School. Juvenile logic sometimes assists ignorance in the creation of such boners. If B.C. represents Before Christ, then B.A. naturally represents Before Adam.

Abbreviation boners are not confined to the classroom. One case deals with the Washington Biological Survey, the agency that puts metal bands on wild birds to study their migratory habits. The bands now read: Notify Fish & Wild Life Services, Washington, D.C. Formerly they were inscribed with the abbreviations: Wash. Biol. Surv. An unofficial version attributes the change in language to the receipt by the Department of a letter of complaint by an angry citizen. "Gentlemen," he wrote, "I shot one of your crows and followed instructions. I washed it, I bioled it, and I surved it. It was terrible. Stop fooling the public."

Another province of abbrevese is the limerick, the most adaptable of comic verse. An easy prey to limerick rhyming is the arbitrary abbreviation.

There was a young teacher of Fla.
Whose conduct grew torrid and ta.
Till an overwrought student
Became quite impudent
And kissed her right out in the ca.
She frowned and called him Mr.
Because in sport he kr.
And so in spite
That very night
This Mr. kr. sr.

A special area of abbrevese that invites parody is classified advertising. The classified advertising manager of a newspaper once wrote a love letter to his girlfriend:

Drst. Hln:
It sms. yrs. since I gzd. upn. yr. btfl. face. Every mnt.
of the 4 wks. you hv. bn. awy. has smd. an etrnly. I thnk.

abt. you frm. the mnt. I wk. up untl the mnt. I go to slp.,
 & evn. thn. I drm. abt. you. Without you lf. is mninglss.
 Wrt. & tll. me tht. you hv. nt. frgtn. me. I am wtng.
 for yr. ltr. on pns. & ndls. Lv. & kss.

Yr. lvng. Hnry

More familiar to most readers than advertising shorthand is *geographical abbrevese*. One type of place-name wit is made up from the fictitious names of towns which, combined with the bona-fide abbreviations of states, resemble compounds and phrases.

Praise, Ala. Vita, Minn. Fiven, Tenn. Goodness, Me.
 Ash, Kan.

These geographicals were created during the 1940s by Joseph Henry Jackson, a miscellaneous writer and leading book reviewer of San Francisco.

Either, Ore. Shapeless, Mass. Proan, Conn. Wet, Wash.
 Hittor, Miss.

Jackson was astonished to wake up one morning and find his playful trifle an overnight craze.

Coco, Colo. Oola, La. Farmerina, Del. Flowan, Neb.
 Skeleton, Ky.

Magazines took up this geographical wordwit, offered prizes for the best specimens, and were swamped by the returns.

Rockand, R.I. Peace, Ark. Bee, O. Squee, Mich.
 I Will, Ariz.

Every state of the union was gone over with a fine-toothed comb, and some like Pennsylvania bore more than one abbreviation.

Poison, Penn. Grandpa, Pa. Deathly, Ill. Apples, Ida. Ifor, N.Y.

The names of celebrities, like Paderoffs, Ky. and Turge, Nev., soon followed. Then, as more and more phonetic liberties were taken, like Income, Tex. and Mathema, Tex., the pastime sank to the lower depths of juvenile wordplay.

Lexicography as well as geography has been drawn into this broad stream of English. The *abbreviniton* is a blendword applied to the comic definition of an abbreviation.

P.S. The most important part of a woman's letter.
etc. A word used to make others believe you know more than you do.

The abbreviniton also represents a definition where the meaning lies in the abbreviation.

college. An educational institution where some girls go to get an M.A., and others go to get an M.R.S.

Closely related to such wit is *initialese* which embraces the play of initials. A familiar example is the Benevolent & Protective Order of Elks, the fraternal society referred to as the Best People On Earth because its initials are B.P.O.E.

W.C.T.U. Whiskey Can't Touch Us.

R.S.V.P. Refreshments Served Very Promptly.

Jocular literature is fond of stories about initials. There was once an elderly lady who rented a room to two young men. "I was a little suspicious of them at first," she explained the next day to a neighbor, "but now I know they must be nice boys. They have towels from the YMCA."

Personal-name initialese is exemplified in the case of an ex-GI named Walter Carroll. He claimed that, due to his heroism in behalf of France during World War II, the French government honored him by putting his initials—WC—in many public buildings.

Another fellow bought a ring which he ordered engraved: "George Oppenheimer to Harriet Lippincott." "If the names are too long," he said to the jeweler, "you can just use the initials." When he called to pick up the ring, he read the inscription: G.O. to H.L.

Symbolic love was once expressed by the group of letters VXL representing *you excel*, the capitals V and U formerly being interchangeable. This monogram, cut into golden locket and trinkets, was at one time an extensive fad.

Cartoons occasionally carry gaglines centering about initials. A recent cartoon shows a man on the phone, saying: "That's right, J.T. It seems that R.N. told B.S. he'd have to sign the contract this week or it would go to F.R. What's that, J.T.? Yes, I see. No, I wasn't referring to I.C. I simply meant okay. No, no, not O.K., just o-k-a-y. That's right, J.T."

Initials are often identified with the names of the products of business. Stock ticker symbols for example like TG for Texas Gulf Sulphur is nicknamed by brokers Tough Guy, and RBI for Reed Roller Bit Co. is nicknamed Runs Batted In.

Initialese also rides and derides the railroads. The Long Island Railroad has been called the Lack of Interest Railroad, the Lazy and Impudent, the Late and Indefinite, the Languid and Indolent, etc. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe has been called, among other epithets, All Tramps Sent Free, Ate Tamales & Spit Fire, All Tonnage & Slow Freight. Many such lists have been compiled, and there is hardly a railroad in America that hasn't been nicknamed cleverly or caustically.

A more adaptable use of initials is found in the proverbial *three R's* which have been regarded for generations as the basic elements of education. Since familiarity breeds parody, this alliterative expression has been wrung and wrenched into endless variations.

When radio came in, the three R's became reading, 'riting and radio. Then followed reading, 'riting and radar; and then, reading, 'riting and rockets. Even evanescent fads add to this variety, like the current three R's of reading, rock and roll. Almost every change in fashion has been followed by some adaptation of phrasing.

Apart from such topical twists are the miscellaneous sayings which derive from the prototype.

The tax collectors' three R's: This is ours, that is ours, everything is ours.

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* Lewis Carroll parodied the proverbial idea. "I only took the regular course," said the Mock Turtle. "Realing and writhing, of course, to begin with, and then the different branches of Arithmetic—Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision."

The chief addition to abbrevese in recent years has been the *acronym*. Not long ago a government official took over the longest title any cabinet member ever had—Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. During the installation ceremony he confessed his relief that he wasn't heading the department of *Public Health, Education and Welfare*. Otherwise, he said, instead of being the chief of HEW, he'd have been the chief of PHEW. This illustrates acronymous humor because acronyms are words formed from the first, or first few, letters of other words. The word TIP is said to have originated in eighteenth-century England with the opening of the

coffee houses there. Customers were encouraged to drop coins in a box labelled "To Insure Promptness."

Acronyms, at first, were accidental formations. Some of them led to jocular associations, by chance rather than design, like AWOL, COD, and ASCAP, but many were disagreeable combinations and hard to remember. The Women's Army Corps acronymizes each of its feminine members into a WAC, a term uncomfortably close to wacky. On the other hand, the Women's Reserve of the United States Naval Reserve was first named Women Appointed for Voluntary Emergency Service in order to acronymize its members pleasingly as WAVES.

With the rising role of acronyms in advertising and public relations, corporate names are being chosen from which suitable or rememberable contractions can be formed. Thus, the American Council To Improve Our Neighborhoods chose that name because its initial letters spell out ACTION.

Thousands of years ago when few people could read or write, acronyms were used to form *mnemonic words*. The first letters of words in religious services and ceremonies were joined into fewer words that could be remembered more easily. The oldest specimens of such mnemonic words still in use are found in the Haggadah, an account of the Israelite Exodus from Egypt read during Passover. In more recent centuries secular techniques have won wide approval. Most of us would never have memorized lists of Presidents, States, colors and other impedimenta without the aid of grouped initials or words.

Sometimes the initial letters of words form undesirable combinations or lead to embarrassing situations. Not many years ago an American foreign aid program was acronymized into a word that shocked the Turks and had to be hastily withdrawn. The Office Of Price Stabilization used to be called, appropriately enough, OOPS.

Recently one wag hinted that you can reach any Senator in Washington by marking your envelope SOB—which of course stands for Senate Office Building.

With the rapid rise of agencies like UNESCO, corporate names like ALCOA, and scientific devices like RADAR, such abbrevese is currently running out of control.

PARTS OF SPEECH

A freshman asked his English professor one day, "What's your guess about our football game next Saturday? You don't think we'll do too bad, do you?" "Don't you mean 'badly'?" corrected the professor. "What's the difference?" asked the freshman. "An 'ly' can make quite a difference," explained the other, pointing to a passing coed. "Look at that girl, and then tell me whether you are looking at her sternly or at her stern."

This story about the adjective *bad* and the adverb *badly* shows how parts of speech are used in the construction of comedy. The same grammatical elements can be interplayed without distinguishing between them:

Many a young man who wants to become a playwright badly realizes his ambition—he becomes a bad playwright.

You cannot tell merely by looking at a word what part of speech it belongs to. Its use decides that. When you *joke*, it's a verb; but when you tell a *joke*, it's a noun.

There are exceptions, of course, like *drink*. This word may be used as a verb or noun, though as a noun it is seldom declined.

Because they express action, *verbs* are the trickiest parts of speech in our language. They can be formed from all other classes of words and juggled in endless ways.

Like a tooth, a verb may be regular, irregular or defective, the irregular specimens giving the most trouble. But unlike its counterpart, the irregular verb is a source of much diversion. It generates a continuous flow of verse on the deviations from normal inflections.

Forth from his den to steal he stole,
His bags of chink he chunk;
And many a wicked smile he smole,
And many a wink he wunk.

Such verbplay is not too far removed from the case of the man who was laid out on the police floor, while the cop who brought him in stood by as the doctor examined him. Finally the doctor arose and said, "That man's been drugged." The cop paled. "Yes, sir," he admitted. "It's my fault. I drug him four blocks."

The abuse of verbs on the lower levels of English is as erratic as it is unpredictable. For every illiterate who says, "I seen," there is his counterpart who says, "I have saw," or some similar solecism. One man was overheard to say: "If I hadda knowed that you wanted to have went, I certainly would have see'd that you got to git to go."

The *auxiliary verbs*—can, will, should, etc. and their negatives can't, won't, shouldn't—help form tenses, moods and voices in serious English. In humorous English they are chiefly used to build epigrams.

Success comes in cans, failures in can'ts.

One can never tell about a girl's morals—and one shouldn't.

Every lazybones deserves a kick in the seat of his can'ts.

Auxiliary verbs also play together in definitions, usually in antithetical expressions.

advice. Something that the wise don't need and fools won't take.

fanatic. One who can't change his opinion and won't change the subject.

juvenile delinquent. A youngster who has plenty of will power and even more of won't power.

Wisecracking owes many a specimen to the equivocal meanings of *copulative verbs*, like seem, grow and turn.

She complained that the only thing her husband grows in the garden is tired.

The magician who walked up Main Street turned into a drug store.

Verbal compounds too generate witty-wise sayings, generally epigrams and aphorisms. These verb-adverb combinations are described in the chapter on *Compounds* under humorological rather than grammatical types.

Life always gives you plenty to *think about*, but seldom enough to *think with*.

As with the verb, so with every other part of speech. The *collective noun* is a word which is singular in form but plural in meaning, like committee, class and crowd. This dual grammatical role keeps the collective noun from being ridiculed as readily as the noun which is both singular and plural in meaning. Pants, for example, may be described as a garment, singular at the top and plural at the bottom. Or, to put it another way, when men wear pants, it's plural; when they don't, it's singular.

The collective noun always seems to collect boners. A schoolboy who was asked to name such a noun said, "Garbage can." Other pupils have given other examples, like wastebasket, vacuum cleaner and attic.

The *group noun* stands for an assemblage of similar

persons, animals, or things. It has become a current fashion to make up lists of such terms for different animals, like a pack of wolves, a pride of lions, or a troop of monkeys. Magazine articles and quizzes have gone in for this sort of thing, with the answers embracing a charm of goldfinches, a murder of crows, an exaltation of larks, and other poetic and exotic terms.

This practice has led to an extension of these nouns of multitude to other fields. One men's haberdashery has even advertised an admiration of shirts, an inspiration of ties, a clutch of handkerchiefs, and a comfort of coats. By applying the idea to comedy, we can come up with a motley of fools, a gaggle of wisecrackers, a groan of punsters, and a musement of jokes.

A teacher was explaining group nouns to her class. "If a quantity of cattle is called a herd, and a quantity of bees is called a swarm," she asked, "what is a quantity of camels called?" One bright lad quickly answered, "A carton."

Another tale relates how four philologists were walking in a theatrical district when they were accosted by several hussies out for a good time. The scholars, of course, ignored the overtures of the gay wenches, but the occasion induced one of the learned men to ask the others, "How would you describe a group like that?" The first one suggested, "A jam of tarts." The second, "A flourish of strumpets." The third, "An essay of Trollope's." The fourth hesitated thoughtfully for a moment, then asked, "How about 'an anthology of pros'?"

Abstract nouns like humor and rumor, and *concrete nouns* like book and hook, also add a little to the laughter of language.

A workman who had just completed the sidewalk in front of a new home, was glowing with pride at his achievement. "Lady," he said to the woman of the house,

"it's as smooth as glass. You won't find a more even surface on any sidewalk in town." At that moment her three-year-old son playfully waded through the center of the newly laid cement, and the man broke out in unprintable profanity. "Please! Please!" interrupted the woman, "I thought you were fond of children." The man replied, "In the abstract—yes, but in the concrete—no!"

Then there was the lady who donated a cake to the local schoolboard members for a post-meeting snack. She was somewhat confused however by the thank-you note she received that commended her for her co-operative spirit "of which your cake was concrete evidence."

The abstract noun seems to have a special affinity for classroom boners, of which the following are typical.

An abstract noun is one that cannot be heard, seen, felt or smelled.

An abstract noun is something you can't see when you are looking for it.

An abstract noun is the name of something that does not exist, like goodness.

Grammarians teach us that *pronouns* are words which stand for nouns but fail to add that they stand for wit as well. A comic lexicographer will define the first person singular *I* not as a personal but as a perpendicular pronoun. And when asked to name two pronouns, will inevitably answer, "Who, me?"

A tourist who visited a Communist country tells how he inquired from a native how many people were opposed to the government. "Six," replied the native. "Is that all?" questioned the visitor. "Yes," explained the native, "you, I, he, she, we and they."

Such pronoun humor is less pro than con. When a woman told her husband that she had discharged the

pretty maid whom she had engaged only the day before, her husband cried, "What! Before giving her a chance?" "No," countered his wife, "before giving you a chance."

Then there was the lawyer who was strolling down Main Street with his wife when a glamorous creature flirtatiously called out, "Hello there!" The lawyer nodded stiffly. "Where'd you meet her?" asked his wife, eying him narrowly. "Oh," he said, "she's just someone I met professionally." "Whose profession?" repeated his wife with suspicion, "yours or hers?"

It is sometimes unwise to pronounce your views on the use of pronouns, as one wife discovered while she and her husband were dressing for dinner. "You are impossible!" she exclaimed. "All the time you talk about *your* house, *your* car, *your* son. Why don't you say *our*? But what's the use of talking to you? You're not even listening. What are you looking for now?" "*Our* pants, dear," he replied, "*our* pants."

Playing one pronoun against another is also a stock device in aphoristic literature. Thomas Henry Huxley, the great English biologist, once wrote: "It is not *who* is right that is of importance, but *what* is right."

This *who-what* contrast recalls a recent gag. When a person calls you on the phone and says, "Guess who this is?", you don't have to guess what he is.

More provoking and wit-productive is the *who-whom* controversy which has been troubling grammarians for generations. Although the pronoun *whom* is the objective case of *who*, it is being replaced more and more by *who* in colloquial usage.

A professor in a small college town was indisposed one day and stayed home. "What happened?" one of his students asked the professor's daughter. "Father's terribly upset," she explained. "Last night an owl in one

of the trees kept repeating, 'To who? To who?' instead of 'To whom?'"

George Ade, the American humorist, once set the problem in a witticism: "'Whom are you?' he asked, for he had been to night school."

Another satiric item reports that the son of a professor of English wrote his father that he had just been hired as an announcer by radio station WHO. His horrified parent wrote back demanding that he give up his job at once and try to find employment with WHOM.

One part of speech omitted from grammars is the *shifted pronoun*. This is a pronoun which replaces an expected one, thus giving a statement an unexpected twist.

The lawyer who helps you get what's coming to him; the relative who is satisfied to live within your means; the flirt who believes that it's every man for herself; the reformer who insists on his conscience being your guide; the patriot who is always ready to lay down your life for his country; the man who buys his wife a mink coat and finds himself up to her neck in debt; the neighbor who is always doing something you can't afford—these are typical of the deft effects produced by shifted pronouns.

Many a television wisecrack is thus contrived, and stand-up comedians delight in them.

She was wearing a sweater so tight, I could hardly breathe.

I was so much in love, I let my imagination run away with her.

I enjoy intellectual girls—I like a girl with a good head on my shoulder.

A word that expresses a feature or quality of a person or thing is an *adjective*, like a *funny* story or a *hen-pecked* husband. When such a word closely resembles

the present participle of a verb—like interesting, charming, arresting—it lends itself to comic grammatical conversion.

Samuel Butler, the English novelist and satirist, once wrote: "She is a very fascinating woman, and he is very fond of fascinating with her."

Voltaire observed that "the adjective is the worst enemy of the noun even though it agrees with it in gender, number and case." This is especially true of its overindulgence, a malpractice which may be described as *adjectivitis*. One brand of *adjectivitis* is journalistic condensation. Instead of newswriting, "The strikers asked for an increase of ten cents an hour," many a newspaperman is inclined to put it, "The strikers presented a ten-cents-an-hour-increase demand."

Despite Voltaire, the adjective is often the best friend of the noun, especially when a story centers about its use or interpretation. A woman whose husband was a notorious philanderer took her troubles to her pastor. "I don't know what to do about Joe," she complained. "Every night he's out gallivanting all over town, drinking and chasing after women." "You have my deepest sympathy," comforted the minister. "Your husband is a miserable sinner." "Miserable sinner?" cried the woman. "He's a sinner, I know, but he's not miserable. He's having the time of his life."

The *adverb* may be defined as a word used to split an infinitive. Actually it is any word which modifies a verb, adjective or another adverb. Because of its wide variety of meaning and use—an adverb may express time, place, manner, degree and circumstance—it is easily adapted to humorous situations and clever sayings.

Observe how the adverbs *how* and *why* create epigrammatic counterpoint: The man who knows how will always have a job; the man who knows why will always be his boss.

An adverb like *yet* can be wrung into many changes. A ninety-year-old dowager was once asked, "When does a woman stop hoping for romance?" She replied, "Goodness me, I don't know yet."

Or a newspaper will report that a movie star "was shot and the bullet is in her yet," and curious readers will wonder just where the bullet is.

After a night out with the boys, a man staggered home about two o'clock and found his wife waiting up for him. The lecture that followed was of intense bitterness, and in the midst of it he fell asleep. Awakening a few hours later he found his wife still pouring forth a fusillade of abuse. Eying her sleepily he asked, "Say, are you talking again or yet?"

Virtually every adverb enriches comic English. The adverb *altogether*, for example. A man was being cross-examined on the witness stand. "Are you married?" "Yes sir." "Any children?" "Yes sir. Five boys and four girls." "Nine altogether?" "No sir. One at a time."

The same adverb was the basis of a newspaper slip: "The Misses Anne, Mary and Constance Jones are spending several days at the home of their mother. This is the first time in years the community has had the pleasure of seeing the Jones girls in the altogether at one time."

Grammar is proverb poor, the most familiar being the self-contradictory proposition that a *preposition* should not be used to end a sentence with. As if to make up for the lack of grammatical proverbs, this saying has bred many a twist and parody.

A teacher of English cautioned his pupils against ending a sentence with a preposition. "Use a period instead," he said. Another teacher advised, "Now remember, never end a sentence with the word *with*, unless you have nothing else to end it with."

Then there was the teacher who emphasized his warning by repetition. "Never end a sentence with a prepo-

sition," he explained, "because this is a rule most writers are guided by. It is one of the principles in grammar that we can't get along without. And it is a practice that all students should stick to."

Another brand of repetition runs several prepositions together. A little fellow, ill in his bedroom upstairs, complained to his mother as she was about to read to him from the same book for the umpteenth time: "What did you bring that book I don't like to be read aloud to out of up for?"

A well-known anecdote of this kind has usually been associated with Winston Churchill. During World War II he had submitted a draft of an important speech to the British Foreign Office for checking the facts. It was returned without corrections except that a preposition which ended a sentence had been transposed to its grammatical position. Annoyed by the Foreign Office purist, Churchill dispatched a note which read: "This is the type of pedantic syntax up with which I will not put."

One of the most-quoted of burlesque gags drew its laughs from a prepositional phrase:

"Would you hit a woman with a child?"

"No, I'd hit her with a brick."

Many an epigram is built around the interplay of two prepositions.

A hermit may get away *by* himself, but he can't get away *from* himself.

A little girl becomes a young lady when she stops going *through* puddles and starts going *around* them.

The surest way to get more *for* your money is with more *of* your money.

The *prepositional definition* is an entirely different matter. It is a definition ending with a preposition whose

object is the word being defined. In this species of comic lexicography the grammatical rule is reversed—every sentence must end with a preposition.

collaboration. What every sin is the result of.
debt. The easiest thing for a motorist to run into.
velocity. What you put a hot plate down with.

The *conjunction* is a word that connects other words, phrases, clauses and sentences, like *but*, *or*, *and*. It is the source of classroom slips, like the schoolboy who bonered that a conjunction is a place where two railroad lines meet. It is the basis of amusing verbal misuse, as in a social worker's report: "Good type family—appear refined, but intelligent." And many a gag turns upon it: "I hear you love music." "Yes, but please keep on playing."

"Remember, Mary," said the lady to the new maid, "there are two things I insist upon more than anything else—truthfulness and obedience." "Yes, ma'am," said Mary, "and when you tell me to tell callers you're out, when you're in, which shall it be—truthfulness or obedience?"

Conjunction stories belong to the category technically called *syndetic humor*. This covers all kinds of conjunctions—co-ordinate, subordinate and correlative—as well as other connectives, like prepositions in conjunction with conjunctions. A syndetic story will sometimes clarify a grammatical distinction better than any amount of explanation.

A professor of English once ordered figs and cream in a restaurant and got figs with cream. He reminded the waitress that he had ordered figs *and*—not figs *with*. "What's the difference?" she retorted. "You got what you asked for." "There's a great deal of difference,

miss," the professor replied. "Would you say that a woman *and* child are the same as a woman *with* child?"

A parallel story tells about a woman who approached the desk clerk of a hotel and asked, "Can you give me a room and bath?" The clerk looked at her quizzically. "No, ma'am," he declared. "I can give you a room, but you'll have to take your own bath."

PREFIXES AND SUFFIXES

W. S. Gilbert, the witty half of Gilbert and Sullivan, was once taken to task by a half-wit for using the word *coyful* in one of his librettos. "Have you ever heard of anything being full of coy?" asked the purist. "Nonsense!" cried Gilbert. "Have you ever heard of anyone being full of bash?"

This story belongs to the humor of affixation which deals with all prefixes and suffixes, and which occupies almost as important a role in humorous as in serious English.

The *repeating prefix* is one of the leading types of such humor. By adding the same prefix to different roots or independent words, we can express ideas pointedly, as in the *insult* which is idiomatically added to *injury*.

A theory is usually an impractical plan for doing something impossible.

A grouch distrusts people who flatter him and dislikes people who don't.

Ambrose Bierce exploited this device when he defined education as "that which discloses to the wise but disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding."

Repeating-prefix comedy characterizes stories as well as sayings. Two Scottish women were discussing the new

minister. "What's your clergyman like?" asked one. "Och, he's nae muckle guid," said the other. "Sax days o' the week he's invisible, and the seventh he's incomprehensible."

Sometimes a witticism achieves a climactic effect by repeating the same prefix more than once.

A parking place is an unfillable opening in an unending line of cars near an unapproachable hydrant.

A committee is a group of the unfit, appointed by the unwilling, to do the unnecessary.

In advertising, a brandname may put its prefix to effective use in descriptive copy. The Dutch *de* Kuyper cordials, for example, always associate the *de* in the product name with de-licious and de-lightful.

Compound prefixion is a species of the repeating prefix in which the same combining form is attached to a word more than once. It is turned to account mostly in definitions.

idiot. A sub-subnormal.

zeal. The spirit of non-nonchalance.

Jew. An anti-anti-Semite.

Not all definitions of this kind bear such brevity because satire demands more than the mere repetition of prefixes.

movie star. An actress who believes in marriage, re-marriage, and re-remarriage.

Unlike compound prefixion, *double prefixion* represents the interplay of two words having the same stem but different prefixes. Such pairs of words describe the telephone which makes it easy to distinguish voices but hard to extinguish them.

Some people are impressed only when they are suppressed.

Importunity knocks at the door oftener than his brother Op.

Love is the quest, marriage the conquest, divorce the inquest.

Not to be confused with the double prefix is the prefixed *double*, occasionally encountered in epigrams.

A bachelor is a man who has been crossed in love, but a married man has been double-crossed.

The *triple prefix* goes one step beyond its double counterpart. It interplays three words having the same stem but different prefixes.

A birthday is something a child deserves, a man observes, and a woman preserves.

Victor Hugo is said to have formulated the following maxim: "Concision in style, precision in thought, decision in life."

A cynic was once criticized for his negative attitude toward things. "I do not propose anything," he maintained, "I do not impose anything, I merely expose."

Many common words are used only with prefixes, like uncouth, except, inflation, disgruntled. The use of such words without their prefixes is the basis of popular comedy called the *dropped prefix*. The best-known specimen is the Goldwynism, "For this role I want a lady, somebody who's couth."

A similar specimen comes from the pen of P. G. Wodehouse: "I could see that, if not actually disgruntled, he was far from being grunted." This witticism inspired a song titled *Gruntled* in a recent Broadway revue which dropped prefixes all over the stage.

During the height of this fad in the mid 1950s, David

McCord, a light writer of comic verse and a comic writer of light verse, became the leading exponent of what he called "the lost positive." He wrote a number of verses full of such decapitated words in one of which he threatened

Some day, full of ertia
I'll be taking off for Persia.

Dropped-prefix stories are of very recent origin. One tells of a man who, while visiting Washington, dropped in to see his Congressman. The man complained about inflation, then added, "And it's not only inflation. Another thing that has to be stopped is this deflation." Somewhat puzzled, the Congressman asked him what he was in favor of. "I think we ought to have some old-fashioned flation," he said.

Humor of this sort tends toward the technique of grouping. A businessman, objecting to the recommendation of his association that members use "flammable" instead of "inflammable," wrote the following letter: "I am instructed to form you that the more dustrious and telligent members of our sociation, cluding myself, ject to the stitution of 'flammable.' We shall frain from biding by your cision til this matter has been vestigated and cussed more thoroughly."

Samuel Butler, wordplayer extraordinary as well as satirist, once wrote: "There should be some schools called deformatories to which people are sent if they are too good to be practical." This saying exemplifies the substituted prefix, a species of wordplay in which a familiar or expected prefix is replaced by another.

Don Herold resorted to this trick when he paraphrased a well-known couplet:

Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to conceive.

Many a *twisted proverb* belongs to this type of prefixion. "Nothing recedes like success" employs the same trick as Oscar Wilde's "Nothing succeeds like excess."

This resembles the social gag when success is the thing to toast to. "Now that our glasses are full, what shall we drink to?" "Excess."

Comic dialogue makes full and frequent use of this device. One teenager asks another, "Do you know a good cure for a cold?" "Yes," says her girlfriend. "Take some aspirin, and go straight to bed and expire."

Like twisted proverbs and gags, epigrams are the natural habitat of this species of humorous English.

Our censors will never be satisfied until we have sex repeal.

The substituted prefix makes every prefix available for unexpected turns of expression. It is used to clever advantage in describing both persons and things, like the impacted tooth that drives you to extraction, the wife who drives a man to distinction, and the pretty secretary who may not be able to add but can certainly distract.

How supple a tool the substituted prefix is can be shown by a familiar Anglicized phrase borrowed from the logic of the Latins. In comic lexicography we may define a reducing salon as a *reductio ad absurdum*, but by means of comic affixation we can shift the phrase in all sorts of ways—the *seductio ad absurdum* of the novel, the *inductio ad absurdum* of initiation rites, the *conductio ad absurdum* of the clown, the *deductio ad absurdum* of mock logic, and many another *productio ad absurdum*.

Prefixion is no newcomer to English wit for it is centuries old. Its earliest uses were in *proverbs* where the intention was to sharpen the teeth of a saw.

There's no inconvenience but has its convenience.
Children are certain cares but uncertain comforts.
Likely lies in the mire, but unlikely gets over.

Often enough the witty wisdom of the proverb lies in its use of a double prefix.

Favors unused are favors abused.

Man proposes but God disposes.

It is a long way from the wit of such proverbs to that of *prefix definitions* although the underlying technique is the same.

wisdom. Common sense in an uncommon degree.

marriage. A knot tied by a preacher and untied by a lawyer.

The prefix definition also pokes fun at individuals.

pessimist. A misfortune-teller.

prohibitionist. A man who is usually a pro-inhibitionist.

office-seeker. A person who is either appointed or disappointed.

Much closer to the heart of punsters and wisecrackers is the phonetic change of a genuine prefix for the sake of a pun. Among these is the union of the letter *p* with the prefix *un-*. There are dozens of such *pun-* words, like *puncivilized*, *punfriendly*, *punjust*. Sample:

What this country needs is a *punabridged* dictionary of wit and humor.

Another species resorts to the prefix *ex-* which is attached to hundreds of words in English. This has led to the practice of joining an *s* to the beginning of many of these words, thus converting the *ex-* into a *sex-* prefix. Words like *excitable*, *excess* and *exercise* become *sexcitable*, *sexcess* and *sexercise*. Although commonly found on the lower levels of humorous English, this *sex fixa-*

tion is not altogether a stranger in our better periodicals. Among the more familiar words of this kind are sexhibition, sexotic, sexperience, sexploit, sexpert, and kindred sexpressions.

It takes all sorts of non-comic prefixes to make up the world of comic prefixes. One of the two such openings with the highest frequency ratings is *in-*, together with its variants *im-*, *il-*, and *ir-*. It characterizes the atheist who has no invisible means of support; the classic scholar who is more ineffectual than intellectual; the co-ed who would rather be well-formed than well-informed; and the poet who is always describing the indescribable.

Samuel Butler, just cited to illustrate the substituted prefix, also wielded these *in-* prefixes as an incisive weapon. The following trio are his:

Nothing is potent against love save only impotence.

Life is the art of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient premises.

If you aim at imperfection, there is some chance of your getting it, whereas if you aim at perfection there is none.

Butler was only one among many who exploited this prefix to express quotable lines. If I single out another quotation which is less satiric than wise, it is because the saying is so characteristic of the source—Albert Einstein:

The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible.

The frequency of the opposing openers *in-* and *ex-* turns them into useful aids in *antonymous prefixion*.

Drinking makes you lose your inhibitions and give exhibitions.

The other prefix of top frequency is *un-*. Unlike *in-*, it is an unchangeable weapon in the arsenal of wit, except when united with the letter *p* as noted above. It is exemplified by the altruist who does unselfish things for selfish reasons; the convivial creature who has a corking good time uncorking; the fair sex who are often ridiculed as the unfair sex; the gambler who converts certainty into uncertainty; the crusading reporter who doesn't merely cover stories but uncovers them; and an unending procession of others.

Although suffixion is the poorer brother of prefixion in the family of affixation comedy, it also contributes much wit and many stories to the lore of language. No person is beyond the reach of its ridicule, no subject beyond the range of its wordplay.

There's a great difference between being constant in love and constantly in love.

A technicality is the only thing that can upset the law with impunity.

Women's wear often goes to extremes, but seldom to extremities.

Not all kinds of suffixion offer such neat specimens. A noun like *ship* which is also a suffix may be converted from one to the other. A wit once observed that if Longfellow were alive today he would write: "Sail on, thou Censorship of State."

In juvenile jokery one *suffix story* recurs constantly. A teacher explains to her class that *-ous* at the end of a word means *full of*. Her request for examples brings forth words like *joyous* and *dangerous*. The tale always ends with a climactic example like *pious*.

Another classroom story deals with the suffix *-ard*. This one is set in a business school where a teacher is testing her students in stenography. "Now, girls," she

asked, "what is the first thing to do when your employer buzzes?" A hand went up. "You pick up your notebook and pencil," ventured a young lady, "and answer the buzzard promptly."

For many of us the earliest introduction to amusing suffixes is the nursery rhyme, like the one about "a slipkin, a slopkin, a pipkin, a popkin." This specimen represents a *repeating suffix*, the play of two or more words compounded with the same terminal forms.

The repeating suffix has fathered a huge flock of children, a family constantly increasing in numbers. Already it includes such familiar figures as the wrangler who is always found in argument but never in agreement; the good liver who first gets opulent, then corpulent; the conversationalist who is a good talker but a poor stopper; the careless driver who is soon carless; and many other creatures of such ill-favored ilk.

The *double suffix* is another fertile type. It counterpoints two words having different suffixes bound to the same base, like describing the upper class as the uppish class.

A baby is the most powerful of powerless creatures.
To be enduring, a peace should be endurable.

The English clergyman and aphorist, C. C. Colton, once took verbal liberties with the double suffix. "Some reputed saints," he observed, "who have been canonized should have been cannonaded."

The *analogical suffix* is more ridiculous than ridiculing. It gives analogous meanings to words whose endings resemble suffixes. The suffix *-ery*, for example. If crockery is a collection of crocks, then flattery is a collection of flats, scullery is a collection of skulls, sorcery a collection of sources, and monastery a collection of monsters.

The shortened form of *-ery* is *-ry*. By the same process of analogy, if jewelry is a collection of jewels, then husbandry is a collection of husbands, infantry a collection of infants, vestry a collection of vests, and pantry a collection of pants.

The *analogical prefix* also provides illogical parallels. Since *con-* is the opposite of *pro-*, then Congress must be the opposite of progress, a confessor the opposite of a professor, a contestant the opposite of a Protestant, a concession the opposite of a procession, and a constitution the opposite of prostitution.

The humor of affixation makes use of all suffixes as well as prefixes. And just as there are favorite prefixes, so there are favorite suffixes, among which is the terminal *-ation*. By means of it adultery is described as the adulteration of marriage by an adult; an appendix is explained as something that gives you information or inflammation; a liar is defined as one who draws no line between his imagination and his information; and a country is called a nation because its internal conflicts are between stagnation and imagination.

The high suffix frequency of *-ation* makes it easy prey for grouping or massing.

A vacation is a short period of recreation sandwiched between long periods of anticipation and recuperation.

Success is the good fortune that comes from aspiration, desperation, perspiration, and inspiration.

Christmas is the season of anticipation, preparation, acceleration, intoxication, and prostration.

Another suffix which is sometimes pointedly used but more often pointlessly abused is *-age*.

The real age of a politician is patronage.

The difference between a junior executive and a senior

executive is sometimes a matter of age, but more often a matter of poundage.

When a man gives his word to another man, it's his bond; when he gives his word to a woman, it's his bondage.

This terminal form commonly functions as a *conundrum suffix*, a juvenile species of syllabics in which the suffix is grouped.

Q. What age is most important to travelers? A. Baggage.

Q. What is the age of communication? A. Postage.

Q. What age is most necessary in shipping? A. Tonnage.

The same pattern is followed with other suffixes, with the play as limited in interest as it is unlimited in example. There are many suffixes in English, like *-ant*, *-form*, *-head*, *-hood*, *-kin*, etc., each of which creates a large number of words. Though they make the poorest of wordplay when massed in conundrums, they can be striking and effective when used individually, as they sometimes are in advertising captions.

The subject of humorous affixation may be explained not only by treating prefixes and suffixes separately, as I have done here, but also by discussing types which put both to dexterous use. One of these, for example, is the *transposed affix* in which a prefix or suffix is shifted from one word to another.

Alimony often enables a woman who lived unhappily married to live happily unmarried.

Civilization is the advance from shoeless toes to toeless shoes.

Sometimes the initial and terminal forms are added to the same words and nimbly played against one another.

The unexpected always happens when you least expect it.

The best defense is a good offense, and the more offensive the better.

Most of us are in favor of tolerance, but it is a very difficult thing to tolerate the intolerant, and impossible to tolerate the intolerable.

Although the following suffix story is fairly familiar, I cannot resist closing this chapter with it. A father encouraged his young son's interest in moths, and advised him to go to the public library and there consult the books on the subject. Several days later the father asked him how he was progressing. "Fine," answered the boy. "The library has helped me very much but there's one book I can't understand." "What book is that?" asked his father. The boy explained, "The title of the book is 'What Every Young Mother Should Know'."

COMPOUNDS

A compound is a word usually composed of two words, like punchline, slapstick. Some compounds are often hyphenated, like rib-tickler, belly-laugh. Other compounds are commonly written as two-word phrases, like tongue twister, comic strip. Then there are compounds formed from three or more words, like heretofore, out-of-the-way.

One of the simplest tricks in wit is to take a root or independent word and play it against any one of its compounds.

The hardest thing about learning to ice-skate is the ice.

A horseshoe is a symbol of luck only when it's on the winning horse.

A patriot always loves his country, but not always his countryman.

Wit and wisdom both find such fusion a useful tool. Josh Billings used to advise: "Don't lay any certain plans for the future. It is like planting toads and expecting to raise toadstools."

Mark Twain imitated his friend by observing that "the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

Far more memorable was another utterance translated

into this form, the prophecy of Hosea: "They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind."

The humor of compounds embraces many distinct types. The *antonymous* species sets one word against another of opposite meaning.

If you drink enough moonshine, you won't see the sunshine.

Many a governess is employed for a backward child by a forward father.

It is safer to be married to the man you can be happy with than to the man you cannot be happy without.

Antonymous compounds combining with the forms *in-* and *out-* are widely prevalent.

Vanity makes a woman always look for shoes that are larger inside than outside.

An income is something that you cannot live within or without.

A New Yorker is rarely inside his own home or outside his own city.

Another favorite among antonymous compounds strikes a contrast between *up-* and *down-*.

In marriage the upkeep of woman is often the downfall of man.

Sometimes the effect is pointed up more ingeniously by compounding the wit as well as the words.

When your outgo exceeds your income, your upkeep is your downfall.

The *defining compound* usually explains a combination term by means of one of its independent words.

wishbone. The bone of contention.

windowpane. The pane we make light of.

wiseacre. The most barren acre in the land.

Related to the defining compound is the comic definition of a word by means of compounds having identical units.

debutante. A bareback with greenbacks.

farmer. A man who works from daybreak to backbreak.

Many an obvious *daffynition* belongs to this category. A compound word is explained by giving literal or special meanings to its independent words.

stalemate. The wife you're tired of.

In the *numerical compound* the wit lies in the interplay between two or more compounds having numerical words.

Many a two-car family lives in a one-horse town.

Another type is the *alternative compound* in which a combination word offers or implies a choice.

An executive directed his secretary, "Miss Jones, please get my broker on the phone." "Yes, sir," she said. "Stock or pawn?"

Two salesmen were discussing the state of business. "How are things?" one asked. "I certainly can't complain," the second replied. "I feel like a two-year-old." "Is that so?" said the first. "Horse or egg?"

The most extensive class of compounds is made up of a variety of puns. There are too many types to be individualized or described here, but a few distinct specimens may be listed.

An undertaker always carries out what he undertakes.

The man who has a girl in every port is not a sailor, but a wholesaler.

A swindler's mind has been described as a scheme engine.

Half a century and more ago when popular comedy was quite naive, the most prevalent of *punning compounds* was the convertible type in which terminal nouns were used as verbs with the compound usually written as two distinct words. These eventually descended to juvenile levels:

Did you ever see a cigar box, a cough drop, a bell hop, a horse fly, a star fish?

Other questions began with interrogatives—who, what, where, when, why:

Who saw the floor mop? What happens when the organ stops? Where did the roller skate? When did the kitchen sink? Why didn't the paper weight?

Some combining forms naturally call forth more play than others, like the word *-stone* when used in birthstones. The precious and semiprecious gems which symbolize the month of one's birth are usually quarried out of compounds in which no stone is left unturned:

The birthstone for shoemakers is the cobblestone; for borrowers, the touchstone; for taxi drivers, the milestone; for laundry workers, the soapstone; for architects, the cornerstone; for tourists, the Yellowstone.

The *reversible compound* transposes the initial and terminal words of the same compound.

The business with the slow turnover generally over-turns fast.

It is easier to look over a person's faults than to overlook them.

The *split compound* divides a compound word and inserts a word or words between the divided parts. It is also called the interposer, or given its figurative name *tnesis*.

Turning a bookworm into a book and magazine worm, explaining a flirt as a *pièce de non-résistance*, reporting a domestic quarrel where one is unreasonable and the other is unable to reason—are variations on this technique.

Phrases as well as compounds are sometimes the victims of such interposing. A preacher once referred to the television program of the Firestone Rubber Company, known as *The Voice of Firestone*, as *The Voice of Fire and Brimstone*.

A compound word may also be split by a dash, without any interposed words, for the sake of a surprise twist.

A wife may be down, but she's never out-talked.

Sometimes the split is made for some other reason. The word *wholesome*, for instance, is very odd because, if you take the whole away, you still have some left.

Ben King's verse on the pessimist cleverly splits compounds:

Nothing to do but work,
Nothing! alas, alack!
Nothing to go but out,
Nothing to come but back.

One effect that requires little effort by wits is the interplay between two compounds having the same initial or terminal words. Such verbal associations caricature the modern girl who evolves from pigtails to cocktails, becomes familiar with lipstick before she handles the broomstick, and wears dresses cut so low that her neckline is where her waistline should be.

In epigrammatic literature *associated compounds* are a not-unfamiliar device, with the terminal forms usually being the same.

Careless eating turns cheese cake into pound cake.

Successful marriages are often based on two books: the cookbook and the checkbook.

In *substituted compounds* the comic effect is gained by replacing one compound with another that contains one of the combining words.

A sycophant is always trying to lift himself by his bootlicks.

The *blended compound* is the fusion of two compounds, with the terminal word of one being the same or similar to the initial word of the other. By such telescoping a bureaucrat becomes a red tapeworm, one's adopted country becomes a stepfatherland, and Lewis Carroll's dragonfly becomes a snapdragonfly.

Many a piece of wit gains its effect solely through a blended compound.

A college education is all too often merely sheepskin-deep.

The subway has created a new animal—the undergroundhog.

Gossip has been defined as something heard over the sour grapevine.

In *compound grouping* three or more compounds having the same initial or terminal words are brightly balanced. The term *clarification*, for example, commonly used in officialese, has been explained as filling in the background with so many details that the foreground goes underground.

There are three kinds of people: right-handed, left-handed, and underhanded.

To get anywhere, you must strike out for somewhere, or you'll get nowhere.

Candor does not mean that you must always be upright, downright and forthright.

Compound grouping need not repeat the word common to all.

Spring is the season of balls: golf, tennis, base and moth.

In the literature of humorous compounding certain words dominate. One of these is *-thing*. It combines terminally with *no-*, *some-*, *any-* and *every-*. An example of this sort of *-thing* is the Irish bull proverb: If you save something when you have something, you'll have something when you have nothing.

One method is balancing the word *thing* against its compound.

Experience is the one thing you cannot get for nothing.

The only thing experience teaches us is that experience teaches us nothing.

Another method is balancing two such compounds.

The man who tells his wife everything, knows nothing.

A pretty girl can wear almost anything or almost nothing.

Some people stand for nothing because they fall for everything.

When antithesis is used, reversible compounds are the logical means.

God made everything out of nothing, but man seems to make nothing out of everything.

A college education should teach you something about everything and everything about something.

Compound grouping too turns on this inclusive word.

A fundamentalist seems to know everything about religion and nothing about anything else.

A know-it-all pretends to know something about everything but really knows nothing about anything.

Another favorite combining word is *-body*, often played by way of a contrast of compounds.

Nobody's business is everybody's curiosity.

Psychiatry tells us what everybody knows in language that nobody understands.

This word is exploited in the defining compound.

A secret is something that somebody tells everybody else in a whisper.

A secret is something a woman tells everybody not to tell anybody.

W. S. Gilbert contributed to this body comic by double counterpoint:

When everyone is somebody then no one's anybody.

The same comprehensive word is sometimes given a triple stroke, as in the case of the nobody with a superiority complex who thinks himself a somebody, and everybody else a nobody.

The combining form *-over* also belongs among the more useful words in this field of humorous English. It often appears in punning compounds, as in the case of the overbearing woman who gave birth to quadruplets.

When a woman looks her age, she tries to overlook it.

In every business there is a constant struggle between the head and the overhead.

A psychiatrist had his office completely redecorated, with all the new furniture being overwrought iron.

Another high-frequency word is *-ache*, always found in antisomatic compounds.

Children when small give you a headache, and when large, a heartache.

The man who prefers whiskey to women is merely exchanging heartaches for headaches.

Better a backache from turning over your garden than a headache from worrying about the rest of the earth.

Unlike *-ache*, the word *-head* is compounded less often for foolery than for the description of fools. It is chiefly employed in informal speech and writing, slang being the headquarters for such words—blockhead, pin-head, saphead, chowderhead, fathead, etc. The practice seems to stem from the synonymous use of head for intelligence, mind or understanding, and is found in other languages.

A wooden anniversary is the day on which a man realizes what a blockhead he was.

When carried to extremes, the practice of compounding words may be worse than compounding a felony. Thereby hangs a tale which deserves to be related here.

The most curious attempt to modify the English language since simplified spelling came in over half a century ago was the revolutionary Herringbone theory, named after its discoverer, Professor Aristotle Herringbone.

According to this distinguished lexicographer, English is gradually becoming a language of compounding because words constantly tend to combine with one another to form new words. This process of wordlinks resembles that of prefixes and suffixes, making use of both front and back compounds, like background and break-front.

There are already many thousands of runon words in English like these which are in everyday use everywhere by everyone. In articles in grammatical journals the professor pointed out that the pattern of linguistic growth is from the simple to the complex. We form twoword compounds before we form those of three or four words. Thus, *whatever* and *so-so* were in frequent use for two centuries before we introduced *whatsoever* and *soandso*.

The English language has already progressed to the point where we commonly employ units of three words, like *notwithstanding* and *nevertheless*. There is no doubt, argued Professor Herringbone, that we are now on the threshold of fourword combinations like *everynowand-then* and *whenasandif*.

Why wait then for a few centuries for all this to happen gradually?

The professor proposed that we anticipate the inevitable by using compound English in all our writing and printing. Weshouldget, hemaintained, thejump overRussian andother languages. The visual strangeness willonly last forashortwhile because oureyes willaccustom themselvesquickly tosuch astyle.

Inorderto maketheacceptance ofcombinationEnglish muchmorerapid ProfessorHerringbone decidedtoputhis theoryintopractice. Hedroppedallspacesbetweenwordsin allhiswriting. Thisledtodifficultiesbecausethebankrefused tohonorhischecksandhisordersforbooksandjournalswere disregardedandhewasforcedtotakealeaveofabsencefrom theuniversitybecausenobodytrulyappreciatedhisremarkable discovery.

The progress of the Herringbone system has for the present been halted until the professor returns from the state institution where he is being held for observation.

SYNONYMICS

What a wealth of wit and wisdom lies in synonyms!
Some are widely familiar, like the winged words of
Robert Browning:

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

Others are little known though no less compact of
magic and immortality:

Night conceals a world, but reveals a universe.

Against such memorable instances the one American
proverb on the subject is a trifle: A synonym is a word
you use when you can't spell the word you want.

Yet the subject is an unexplored field of linguicomedie,
a *terra incognita* whose resources can be examined here
only in part, and these briefly, but enough to suggest
their inexhaustible variety.

Few if any words in English may be said to be abso-
lutely synonymous. *Night* and *evening* are very much
alike, yet an evening gown is not exactly a nightgown.
Since words having the same meanings are at best rare,
synonymics includes the humorous use of analogous
words which are comparable in certain respects, like dif-
ferent animals or different colors. It also includes words

associated by some relation, like car and road, or lion and jungle.

Words of nearly the same meaning are the basis of many an anecdote in jocular literature.

When Thomas Jefferson presented his credentials as U.S. Minister to France, the French Premier said, "We are delighted that it was you who have come to replace Benjamin Franklin." "Not exactly, sir," returned Jefferson. "I have come to succeed Franklin, not to replace him."

The *corrective synonym* is always set in a story. A man was telling a group about a personal experience. "The day on which my wedding occurred. . . ." "Pardon my interruption," a purist broke in, "but affairs like marriages, receptions, dinners and things of that sort 'take place.' It is only calamities that occur. You see the distinction?" "Yes, I see," agreed the storyteller. "As I was saying, the day on which my wedding occurred. . . ."

A farmer married a woman who was forever correcting his usage of words. One evening he told her he had a friend named Bill he wanted her to meet. "Don't call him Bill," she prompted, "call him William." When the friend arrived the farmer said, "I'd like to tell you a tale." "Not tale," she interrupted. "Say anecdote." That night the farmer asked his wife to put out the light. "Not put out," she corrected. "Say extinguish." Later in the night she awakened her husband to investigate a noise she had heard. "What is it?" she asked when he returned. "It was only a William-goat," he replied carefully, "which I took by its anecdote and extinguished."

The *trick synonym* story deals with the deceptive use of analogous or related words. Two horse traders were engaged in a bitter discussion. Said one, "That horse you sold me is almost blind." "Well," replied the other slyly,

"I told you he was a fine horse but that he didn't look good."

This wordplay recalls the saying that if a girl gives up wearing glasses she looks better but doesn't see as well.

Another look-see antithesis is equally sharp: On the beach you look only half as long to see twice as much.

Such sayings are called *synonymisms* because their wit stems from the interplay of two synonyms.

Results are what you expect, consequences are what you get.

Climate lasts all the time, but weather lasts only a few days.

Why is it that you convince a man, but persuade a woman?

Many an aphorism springs from such antithetical wording.

The world is full of men who are making good livings but poor lives.

Proverbs too are often brightened by this device, especially when balanced by antonyms.

Many know how to flatter, but few know how to praise.

A synonymic proverb

All well-bred men should know:

Horses sweat and men perspire

But ladies only glow.

Generally such proverbs are built out of analogous or associated words rather than synonyms, as in the saying that a burned child dreads the fire. Observe how similar correspondence builds epigrams:

A woman who puts the right number of candles on her birthday cake is playing with fire.

Many a man is badly burnt in the stock market by picking up a hot tip that's sure-fire.

Don't be impatient: you can't warm your hands by burning your fingers.

This last specimen illustrates the *double synonymism* in which two pairs of verbal associations, *warm—burning* and *hands—fingers*, spark the wit.

The pioneers who blazed the trails now have descendants who burn up the roads.

Many a comic definition is expressed in the form of a double synonymism.

tact. The art of dressing the bare facts and draping the naked truth.

As a rule, however, the *synonymous definition* goes in for only one pair of related words or phrases.

Congress. A legislative body whose members are duty bound to meet but not to get together.

patriot. A person who sometimes supports the government, but more often holds it up.

career woman. A woman who is eager to enlarge her sphere, but not her circumference.

One of the classic sayings of Oscar Wilde is his description of a cynic as a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. This saying typifies the synonymous definition which draws a thumbnail character sketch of an antisocial creature.

gold digger. A woman who pulls the wool over a man's eyes, and then fleeces him.

double-crosser. A man who acts like a skunk and hopes nobody will get wind of it.

hypochondriac. A woman who always broods over her health, but never hatches a remedy.

Caricature has always been partial to synonymic jeers and sneers. The proverbial missionary who comes to do good and ends by doing well; the blabbermouth who is always shooting off her mouth, but never runs out of ammunition; the clergyman who thinks the eternal gospel requires an everlasting sermon; the detective who can't tell a thief from a kleptomaniac; the spendthrift who spends his money like water, but finds it hard to liquidate his debts—these are typical of the human targets at which literate wits and literary humorists are always aiming their synonyms.

The *double definition* is normally a satiric antithesis explaining two words of similar or related meaning.

Character is what you get; reputation is what you get caught at.

Discussion is an exchange of intelligence; argument is an exchange of ignorance.

Success is getting what you want; happiness is wanting what you get.

Less satiric and less prevalent is the *reversible synonymism* whose effect is also enlivened by antithesis.

An American lifts his hat to ladies in an elevator, but an Englishman elevates his hat to ladies in a lift.

This Anglo-Americanism recalls the remarks of an American mayor who had returned from England. He was impressed by the deference paid to the Lord Mayor of London. "They call him 'Your Worship,' and when he enters a room, they announce, 'My Lord, the Mayor.' But when I come into a room here at home, they say, 'My God! the Mayor.'"

Although most wit of this class involves the meaning rather than the sounds of words, synonymics and punning often play together. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare puns on the word *grave* when he has the dying Mercutio say, "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man." In *synonymic puns*, however, this word plays against an analogous or associated word.

People who believe in cremation have grave doubts about death.

The man who is buried in thought naturally has a grave appearance.

The synonymic pun may reside in either of the two complementary words. In the following specimen the double meaning lies not in the word *grave* but in its counterword *digs*:

Many a wife sends her husband to an early grave with a series of little digs.

A favorite habitat of the synonymic pun is the gagline under cartoons.

Said a girl to her dull date: "No, my ears are not pierced, they are merely bored."

Explained one young thing to another: "They are made for each other. He owns oil wells, and she's always gushing."

In the old days of vaudeville the *sillynym* gag was often a pun.

"I went to see a spiritualist." "Any good?" "Oh, medium."

Hotel Owner: "Did you find any towels in his suitcase?" Hotel Detective: "No, but I found a chambermaid in his grip."

Synonym grouping is another standard device, like Winston Churchill's well-known description of Russia as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

The trouble with many people is that they take so long to start to begin to get ready to commence.

Our florist has two children—a girl who's a budding genius and a boy who's a blooming idiot.

Sometimes such grouping is overdrawn, like the following case of verbal fireworks found in magazine fiction: "His whole face lit up as his cheeks flamed. He gave her a burning glance and then, blazing with wrath and boiling with rage, he administered a scorching rebuke."

Another grouping concerns a schoolboy who, when asked to use the terms *transparent*, *translucent* and *opaque* in a sentence to show the difference between them, said: "The windows in this classroom were once transparent, now they are translucent, and next month they will be opaque."

This specimen also exemplifies an extensive species called *discriminated synonyms* which makes clever distinctions between words of similar meaning.

Mark Twain was once asked the difference between a mistake and a blunder. He explained it this way: If you walk into a restaurant and walk out with someone's silk umbrella and leave your cotton one, that's a mistake. But if you pick up someone's cotton umbrella and leave your silk one, that's a blunder.

A taxidriver whose fixed fee is fifty cents for the trip from a certain hotel in Washington to the Navy Building, received just that amount from a prosperous-looking customer. "That's correct, isn't it?" the man asked as the cabby stared at the two quarters. "It's correct," answered the cabby enigmatically, "but it ain't right."

A woman who had married a stingy man once explained to her daughter the difference between the synonyms *near* and *close*. "I am your nearest relative," she said, "but your father is the closest."

Such decided distinctions also characterize sayings. One cynic distinguished between the synonyms *calamity* and *disaster*. "If a mother-in-law fell into the lake," he said, "that would be a calamity; but if someone pulled her out, that would be a disaster."

A contrasting distinction without a difference was the remark of a baldheaded man: "I'm having a toupee made that's so marvelous, you can't tell it from a wig."

Discriminated synonyms often focus on children. One youngster explained the difference between *enough* and *sufficient* this way: "When mother cuts me a piece of cake, I get sufficient. But when I cut it myself, I get enough."

A little boy in church who had just been aroused from his nap, said to his father, "Daddy, has the preacher finished?" "He's finished," replied his father, "but he hasn't stopped yet."

Then there was the minister's son who came home from school with a question. "Daddy," he said, "my teacher says that *collect* and *congregate* mean the same thing. Do they?" "Perhaps they do," answered the minister, "but you can tell your teacher that there's a big difference between a good congregation and a good collection."

The *differential saying* is usually a matter of discriminated synonyms. It starts out with "the difference between" and then goes on to contrast two words of similar meaning. These sayings are sometimes twisted to and from other forms like riddles and double definitions.

The difference between talent and genius is that talent gets paid every week.

The difference between a career and a job is the difference between 30 and 60 hours a week.

The difference between a bachelor girl and a spinster is nobody's business.

The differential saying may also be adapted from the personal comparative.

The difference between pride and vanity is that we have one and other people have the other.

The *personal comparative* is marked by epigrammatic self-satire. It implies that everyone thinks himself better than anyone else, but only the egotist says so. One of Emerson's fine lines belongs to this category: "That which we call sin in others is experiment for us."

The rule in humor that distinct species of wit acquire stylized expression, holds true here. Normally the personal comparative is a brief, antithetical saying made out of two conditional clauses, each beginning with *when*.

When we practice it, it's economy; when the other fellow does, it's stinginess.

When another person departs from the truth, it's a lie; when we do, it's imagination.

When the other fellow is set in his ways, he's stubborn; when you are, it's just firmness.

This type of synonymics is sometimes given definition form.

secret agent. A spy when he's on the enemy's side, but an intelligence officer when he's on ours.

The favorable comparison of oneself with others in a twofold relation led to a triple *conjugation*. As far back as 1911 *Judge* magazine ran a much-quoted quip:

The other man's word is an assertion, yours is truth, your wife's is law.

Shortly after the first World War a perfected grammatical specimen appeared on both sides of the Atlantic. In England the item was allonymously credited to the Bishop of Herford, but in America the humorous magazine *Life* in 1925 framed it, uncredited, in a simple conjugational pattern:

I am firm-willed, you are stubborn, he is a pig-headed fool.

Somehow no one saw the comic potentials in this synonymic comparison until 1948 when philosopher Bertrand Russell quoted it on BBC's *Brains Trust* program as the humorous conjugation of an irregular verb. This did the trick. It caught on at once, was widely reprinted, and London's *New Statesman & Nation* conducted a competition or contest on comparable conjugations. Since then this type has become a fixture of synonymics.

The witticism usually follows the systematic arrangement of conjugation in the singular number, the sequence being I, you, he or she.

I am slender; you are emaciated; she is a walking skeleton.

I am fastidious; you are fussy; he is an old woman.

I am an epicure; you are a gourmand; he has both feet in the trough.

I have something about me of the subtle, haunting, mysterious fragrance of the Orient; you rather overdo it, dear; she stinks.

A switch on such comparisons tells about a rookie who complained to the army doctor, "I've got a pain in my abdomen." "Young man," replied the medico,

"officers have abdomens, sergeants have stomachs, *you* have a bellyache."

Here we have class distinctions among words paralleling the class distinctions among the people who use them. Such differences among synonyms are sometimes due to levels of usage, like describing pants as the country cousins of trousers.

Some people lie, while others merely prevaricate.

It hurts just as much to have a tooth extracted as it does to have it pulled.

The trouble with girls who are highbrows is that they would rather be osculated than kissed.

Class distinctions among synonyms may also be a matter of *connotation*. Even when words have the same meaning, they convey different overtones and suggest different ideas.

Never help an old lady across the street—escort her.

The man who gets sick calls a doctor, but the man who becomes ill summons a physician.

The rich man has acute laryngitis, but the poor man has a sore throat.

A conventional device to set off such differences is *connotative grouping*. Amateur philologists make a pastime out of compiling connotative lists that are hardly less valid than the lists of discriminated synonyms compiled by professional lexicographers.

You may call a woman a chicken, but you mustn't call her a hen.

You may call a woman a kitten, but you mustn't call her a cat.

You may call a woman a vision, but you mustn't call her a sight.

The comic effect of connotative grouping is intensified by *comparative gender*. The following same-but-different specimens show the female of the species in an unfavorable light, but it is just as easy to reverse the bias.

If he hears something at the office, it's news; if she hears something at a bridge party, it's gossip.

If he runs the household, he is the head of the house; if she runs it, she wears the pants in the family.

If he keeps his eye on her at a party, he's an attentive husband; if she sticks close to him, she's a possessive wife.

The range of synonymics embraces words of closely related association, giving them the quality of correspondence even when they are of dissimilar meaning. The use of colors in association, for example, will produce the same effect as if they were synonyms.

A black cow gives white milk that makes yellow butter.

The world will forgive you for being blue, sometimes forgive you for being green, but it will never forgive you for being yellow.

One restaurateur drew up a menu more colorful than successful. It included dishes like Blue Points, Green Turtle Soup, White Fish, Orange Sherbet, Black Coffee, etc.

The widespread existence of synonymics in popular humor is largely due to the ease with which variations may be played on almost any common word. The word *ridiculous*, for example.

One girl says to another: "Wouldn't it be funny if John should fall in love with me?" The other replies: "Perfectly ridiculous!"

Sometimes when a woman buys a dress at a ridiculous price, she also buys it for an absurd figure.

This suggests the word *figure*:

A woman with a good figure can often shape her own destiny.

· A girl likes to be shipshape in everything but her figure.

Since this chapter began with a quotation from Browning it may be appropriate to round it out with a quotation from a contemporary of his. In *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens cannot resist a synonymic twist. "I say, old boy, where do you hang out?" Mister Pickwick replied that he was at present suspended at the *George and Vulture*.

Q. How can you make a slow horse fast? A. Don't feed him. (Alternative Answer: You tie him.)

This superficial conundrum shows how extremes meet for the same analogous pair make up what Erasmus, the great Dutch humanist, considered the prince of proverbs—the oxymoron *festina lente*, make haste slowly.

Like electricity which is charged through opposite electrodes, so many a *proverb* is sparked by words of opposite meaning.

Love and hate are blood relations.

The bald head talks most about hair.

The highest flood has the lowest ebb.

There are hundreds of antonymous specimens in the literature of proverbs, some familiar like the caution against teaching an old dog new tricks, others less familiar like the advice against sweeping the stairs upwards instead of downwards.

Many techniques are employed in such sayings. The alliterative *through thick and thin*; the alternative *either a feast or a famine*; the antithetical *much light, much shadow*; and so on through the rest of the alphabet of contrasting terms.

A double set of words of opposite meaning wrapped up in a tight package of contrast is standard proverbial fare.

He who swells in prosperity will shrink in adversity.

The lucky man's enemy dies, and the unlucky man's friend.

The dark of night is more certain than the light of day.

The *double antonymism* is as conspicuous a species of humorous lexicography as the double synonymism. The proverbial "easy to give but hard to take" has served as

the comic definition of medicine, advice, examinations, and the like—or dislike. Many another definition is based on similar doubling.

debt. The certain outcome of an uncertain income.

playboy. A man who collects old masters and young mistresses.

economy. Denying ourselves a necessity today in order to buy a luxury tomorrow.

The most fertile soil for such double antonymy is epigrammatic literature.

Many can rise to the occasion, but few know when to sit down.

The higher a drunk is in the evening, the lower he feels in the morning.

The less you bet, the more you lose when you win.

It is difficult to restrict the classification of antonymics to one chapter because it partakes of many divisions of grammar and humor. I have used antonymous sayings in other chapters to illustrate different types of humorous English, like antonymous compounds in the chapter on *Compounds*, and antonymous prefixes in the chapter on *Prefixes and Suffixes*.

Moreover, antonymics combines techniques like compounding and prefixion. For example, by playing the combining form *over-* against its contrasting prefix *under-*, we may describe a submarine as a boat that can travel overseas underseas; a modern girl as one who is inclined to be underdeveloped and overexposed; and a state legislature as a political body where the overhead is usually less important than the underhand.

Equally significant is the correspondence between antonymics and antithetics, with the latter really embracing the former. Aristotle alone seems to have realized that

antithetics is one of the few basic building blocks of linguicomedy. Without pursuing this path of inquiry, an instance may be given here to show how antithetics joins with other techniques to intensify comic effects.

The antonyms *optimist* and *pessimist* are commonly played against each other, as in the epigram: An optimist is a man who marries a pessimist. Mark Twain doubled such a couple with *young* and *old*, and then gave it forceful antithetical support. "There is no sadder sight," he remarked, "than a young pessimist, except an old optimist."

Mark Twain's observation matches another epigram expressed in the form of a *triple antonymism*.

If a man is a pessimist before forty, he knows too much; if he is an optimist after forty, he knows too little.

Such triple antonymisms contrast three sets of words of opposite meaning, and usually enclose them in an antithetical sentence.

You can afford to keep your temper when you're right, but you cannot afford to lose it when you're wrong.

Even more widely favored is the *oxymoron*. This is the technical name for a figure of speech in which two opposite or contradictory terms are combined or closely related in one expression. Bertrand Russell used an oxymoron in referring to himself as a happy pessimist. So did the circus that advertised it had the biggest midget in the world, and likewise the official who ridiculed a government co-ordinator as one who brings systematic chaos out of orderly confusion. In jokelore the proverbial wise fool may be described as an oxymoron who is also a foxy moron.

Things as well as persons may be oxymorons, like

characterizing the law as the unjust distribution of justice, or the age of discretion as the period when you have learned to be indiscreet discreetly. By extension of this device Pope's proverbial line may be paraphrased: A little bigamy is a dangerous thing.

In his biography of Harold Ross, founder and editor of the *New Yorker*, James Thurber tells how Ross was irked because critics were constantly using the terms "pretty" and "little" to describe the early numbers of the magazine. One day he discussed the problem with Thurber who, to torment him, used both terms as oxymorons in a single sentence of an article in the magazine: "The building is pretty ugly and a little big for its surroundings."

Poetry too puts this device to use, sometimes with surpassing effect.

The wise commit the errors,
The good commit the sins,
The brave are full of terrors,
Only the loser wins.

Onomastics, or playing with names, often combines with antonymics. *High* and *low* have been twisted into proper names in the comic strip *Hi and Lois*. This pair of playwords constantly create *antonymous caricature*: The smart woman who has a high forehead or a low neckline; the opportunist who stoops low in order to rise high in the world; the middleman who gets the difference between the low prices charged by the farmer and the high prices paid by the consumer.

By means of another antonymous pair, a newspaper paragrapher captions his daily comments after the wise old bird of India, *Major Mynah*. This combination explains the earth as a minor planet with major problems.

And it served the wit who said it takes a major operation to extract money from a minor poet.

The most celebrated example of *antonymous naming* in American history flourished over two centuries ago. In 1732, the year of Washington's birth, Ben Franklin began to publish his famous almanac which was to run for 25 years and profoundly affect colonial life. Using the pseudonym Richard Saunders, he played on the verbal contrast between *poor* and *rich*, and referred to himself as Poor Richard.

This favorite pair is often combined with other contrasting pairs.

Many a family manages to live in public as the rich do by living in private as the poor do.

A poor man gives a big tip pretending to be rich; a rich man gives a small tip pretending to be poor.

The poor imitate the rich and get poorer; the rich imitate the poor and get richer.

Shakespeare, a master of antonymics, had something similar to say on this matter. "A miser," he wrote, "grows rich by seeming poor; an extravagant man grows poor by seeming rich."

Antonymy shows no special consideration for any form or level of wit. The *antonymous riddle* has always been popular.

Q. Why did Robin Hood rob only the rich? A. Because the poor have no money.

An instance of antonymous naming more modern than Franklin's occurred in a library when a schoolgirl asked for a book of poetry by *No! Yes!* "That must be the name of the poem," suggested the librarian, "not the author's name." "It is the author's name," insisted the

girl. "I looked it up. His first name is Alfred." The poet turned out to be Alfred Noyes.

Yes and *no* are a popular twosome in antonymics. Cervantes observed that "between a woman's yes and no, I would not venture to stick a pin."

Antonymous definition: Adolescence—The age when a girl's voice changes from no to yes.

Antonymous compound: On the stage some girls get nowhere while others get yeswhere.

Antonymous double: Always say no, and you'll never be married; always say yes, and you'll never be divorced.

The yesman is the natural source of such wit.

A yesman and a no-woman seldom mean it.

A yesman wouldn't be so servile if he didn't lack know-how.

It's all right to be a yesman if the boss you yes is a *know* man.

An admiral who always encouraged his officers to act on their own initiative, received a signal from one of the captains in his fleet: "Lost in fog. Shall I proceed to destination or return to base?" The admiral replied: "Yes." Shortly afterwards another message arrived: "Do you mean yes, proceed to destination, or yes, return to base?" This time the signal in return was: "No."

Another type of contrasting wordplay is implied in the ironic epithets of childhood when we call the tall boy Shorty, the fat girl Skinny, the slow youngster Speedy, the overgrown kid Tiny. Such *substituted antonyms* make use of a name or word in place of its expected antonym.

Max Beerbohm once wrote that "to give an accurate and exhaustive account of that period would need a far less brilliant pen than mine."

Robert Benchley followed this trick when he wrote that "it was one of those plays in which all the actors unfortunately enunciated very clearly."

Then there is the story about George S. Kaufman who, when asked for his opinion about a movie that had been given a tremendous build-up, antonymized, "Frankly, I was underwhelmed."

All or most wits practice this art of clever substitution. The contented husband who is on listening terms with his wife; the reformer who makes himself objectionable by spoiling all the bad things in life; women who look one another over with microscopic carelessness—such caricature exploits the device of substitution as often as epigrams do.

No man really understands a woman, no matter how young he is.

Oscar Wilde went in for this device constantly. He would describe an individual by saying that "he hasn't a single redeeming vice," or that "he is old enough to know worse." He drew upon the same trick when twisting proverbs, as: "She who hesitates is won." Every now and then, among these cute remarks, he struck off a superb *antonymous epigram*:

A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies.

The *repeating antonymism* consists of a pair of contrasting words whose repetition gives them an enhanced effect.

The weaker sex is really the stronger sex because of the weakness of the stronger sex for the weaker sex.

Reversible antonyms likewise repeat the contrasting words but add a more incisive quality through transposition, and also often through antithesis.

Nowadays the rising generation retires when the retiring generation rises.

Men think women cannot be trusted too far; women think men cannot be trusted too near.

The *conditional opposite*, a species of iffy counterpoint, also resorts to reversible antonyms.

If you're rich, you have to support others; if you're poor, others have to support you.

More often, however, such sayings or gags set two opposing suppositions against each other.

If you want to remember, tie a string around your finger; if you want to forget, tie a rope around your neck.

A lad, when asked where his friend was, said, "If the ice is as thick as he thinks it is, he's skating. If it's as thick as I think it is, he's swimming."

One of the best conditional opposites was uttered by Socrates. "By all means marry," he advised. "If you get a good wife, you'll be very happy. If you get a bad wife, you'll become a philosopher."

Antonymous phrases are tossed and turned every which way. For example, *something for nothing*. Bernard Shaw gave it satiric bite when he antonymized: Gambling promises the poor what property performs for the rich—something for nothing.

The same phrase may be a reversible antonymism, as when an auctioneer sells nothing for something to a buyer who is looking for something for nothing.

It may be a punning antonymism, as at the auction where, if you're not careful, you'll get something for nodding.

Then again, it may be merely a simple antonymism, as: Fame often proves that you can make something out of nothing.

Here, as elsewhere, antithesis is often brought in to point up the idea more sharply.

You write letters when you have something special to say or when you have nothing special to do.

A variety of nothing is better than a monotony of something.

Another species of something-for-nothing wit is based on the substituted antonym, with *nothing* replacing the usual *something*.

A village is a place where nothing happens every minute.

One should never open one's mouth in polite society unless one has nothing to say.

Like other basic ideas underlying linguicomedry, antonymics operates on all levels. The descriptive adjectives *black* and *white* may serve as a suitable sample, as in the saying that white eggs come from black hens, and black hens from white eggs.

An old proverb tells us that every black has its white, and every sweet its sour.

Shakespeare plays with this pair quite often. He has Mercutio say, "Alas! Poor Romeo! He is already dead—stabbed with a white wench's black eye."

Satire informs us that the truth is never as black as it is painted nor as white as it is whitewashed.

Then there is the occupational trick of sending apprentices in the painting trades on such fool's errands as fetching black whitewash or white lampblack.

An equally fruitful pair of descriptive adjectives *good* and *bad* (or *evil*) are the "evaluative factors" that psychology makes much ado about.

Milton's Satan cries, "Evil, be thou my good!" Shakespeare proverbs, "Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage." And Edmund Burke sagely counsels, "All

that is necessary for the forces of evil to triumph is that good men do nothing."

Endless are the ways in which these opposites have been used to contradict, negate, reverse, contrast and balance each other. Here are some epigrams:

When in trouble, bad politicians go to good lawyers.

Good taste is better than bad taste, but bad taste is better than no taste at all.

Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment.

Antonymics plays as substantial a role in verse as in prose. In the following trio, the final selection is from Shakespeare.

Whilst Adam slept Eve from his side arose:
Strange that his *first* sleep should be his *last* repose.

'Tis the very *best* world that we live in
To lend, or to spend, or to give in;
But to borrow or beg, or to get a man's own,
'Tis the very *worst* world that ever was known.

Man must endure
His *going hence* even as his *coming hither*.
Ripeness is all.

These immortal words of Shakespeare are expressed in antithesis as well as double antonymy. Its contrast between *come* and *go* forms the basis of one of the most famous stories in history. A soothsayer had forewarned Caesar that he would be in great danger on the Ides (15th) of March. On that very day as Caesar was on his way to the Senate he met the soothsayer. "The Ides of March have come," the Roman dictator jested. "What have you to say now?" "Yes," replied the prophet forebodingly, "but they have not gone." What followed is ancient history.

GENDER

A member of the New York City Council once suggested the purchase of a dozen Venetian gondolas for the lake in Central Park. Another member, more romantic but less literate, replied: "I think it's a good idea. These Venetian gondolas would make our park more beautiful. But I think we could do with less than a dozen. Why not buy two—a male and a female—and let nature take its course?"

This story illustrates how humor enlarges language. In grammar gender is the classification by which certain words are grouped in relation to sex or their lack of it. In humor gender covers not only these words but the sex relations of persons and animals.

One comic device uses a derogatory word or phrase and then gives it a twisted meaning for woman or wife. Like the man who had a terrible disposition—but took her with him everywhere.

Another device is based on *misleading gender*. One man says to another, "I was once in love with a twin." "Didn't you ever kiss the other one by mistake?" asks his friend. "Oh, no," explains the first. "Her brother had a mustache."

Many a gender gag fools with fools and their folly. A woman was consoling her friend who was being divorced. "Men are such beasts," she cried. "I sometimes

wish there were only two sexes—women and children.”

Gender is usually represented as a group of three: masculine, feminine and neuter. This triple union has engendered many a slip, especially in the literature of boners. One schoolboy blundered, “Gender shows whether a man is masculine, feminine or neuter.”

Another genderized them as masculine, man; feminine, woman; neuter, corpse.

The usual epigram begins with “The three genders are . . .” or “The three sexes are . . .” followed by some verbal twist.

The three genders are masculine, feline and neuter.

The three sexes are men, women and insects.

The three genders are masculine, feminine and nuder.

Among the lesser varieties of gender wit is the *definition*. This explains a word in terms of its masculine or feminine counterpart.

intuition. The feminine of suspicion.

patrimony. The masculine of matrimony.

fortress. The feminine of fort because it is harder to silence.

Analogical gender is another minor species of wit. A suffix like *-ess*, for instance, is commonly used to form feminine nouns, as: *lion*, *lioness*. By means of analogy, words ending in the letters, not the suffix, *-ess* may be made to represent the facetious feminines of other words. Thus, the feminine of mister is mistress, the feminine of ass is assess, the feminine of prof is profess, the feminine of reader is redress.

There is less grammatical gender in serious English than *epigrammatical gender* in humorous English. One type of epigram employs the technique of substitution

where a noun or pronoun of one gender takes the place of its expected opposite.

Why is it we never hear of a self-made woman?

Another is the *feminine comparative*, a witticism that represents woman as similar to some object or animal.

Woman is like a time-table: subject to change without notice.

Woman is like a coin: prized according to face value.

Women are like thoroughbred horses: you have to speak kindly to them before you bridle them.

The *masculine comparative* follows the same pattern.

Man is like a worm: he comes along, squirms a little, then some chicken gets him.

The feminine and masculine comparatives differ from *comparative-gender* epigrams which compare man with woman.

In awkward situations wives cry and husbands lie.

A woman knows the value of love but a man only knows its cost.

A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still; a woman convinced against her will is a myth.

Since men make up such contrasts between the sexes, it should not be surprising to find that women usually get the worse of it.

Time and tide wait for no man, but woman expects all three to wait for her.

A man expects an apology if you're in the wrong; a woman expects one if you're in the right.

The *reversible-gender* epigram is a species of comparative gender which not only contrasts man with woman but reveals their reversible natures.

No man says all he means, and no woman means all she says.

Woman accepts man for the sake of marriage, and man accepts marriage for the sake of woman.

Man begins by loving love and ends by loving a woman; woman begins by loving a man and ends by loving love.

It is reversible-gender sayings of this sort that warrant the division of all men into three classes: those who call woman the opposite sex, those who call her the opposition sex, and those who call her the contrary sex.

Only a short step separates such differences from another type of comparative-gender comedy called *His-&-Hers*. This arose about the time of World War II and has been a favorite of wisecrackers, gagwriters and cartoonists ever since. It began innocently enough with the practice of monogramming towels and other linens with HIS and HERS.

Most of the early specimens were amusing mixups and extensions, like the husband and wife whose telephones were labeled HIS and HERS. Or the cemetery scene where two adjoining tombstones were engraved HIS and HERS.

Another early specimen was the hillbilly hotel where the towels were marked HIS'N and HER'N. A twist on this combination is the story of the GI, newly arrived in Germany from Tennessee, who approached an American in a railroad station and asked, "Where's the men's room round heah?" The other pointed toward a doorway labeled *Herren*. "I seen that half an hour ago," objected the Southerner. "What I wanna know, mistah, is where is his'n?"

Satiric specimens followed these variations. A spinster shows a lady friend her bathroom towels labeled this dual way. "There isn't any HIS," she explains, "but it makes me feel better."

Another woman who had been married many times monogrammed her towels **HERS** and **TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN**.

A realistic husband thought up the first practical two-car garage. One door of the garage reads **HIS**, the other **HERS**. The **HERS** door is two feet wider.

In Greenwich Village, where boy meets girl and no one knows which is which, a shopwindow exhibiting handmade jewelry displays this sign: **HIS & HER EARRINGS**.

A story is told about a newlywed couple who had received among their wedding presents several sets of linens marked **HIS** and **HERS**. Even more personalized was the olive drab blanket which was presented by the bridegroom's army buddy. It had the letters **US** stamped on it.

An allied species of gender comparisons covers *restroom signs*. The usual ones are **MEN** and **WOMEN**, or **LADIES** and **GENTLEMEN**. It would seem that such distinctions are foolproof. Nevertheless, a Scotsman had a rather embarrassing experience. He could have sworn that the sign on the door read **LADDIES**.

In many restaurants the public toilets are given play-name substitutes: **ADAM** and **EVE**, **HE** and **SHE**, or **LADS** and **LASSES**.

Restaurants furnished in special ways put names on restroom doors that are in keeping with the decor. A hunting-type spot will put up **STAGS** and **DOES**. An equestrian spot will mark out **COLTS** and **MARES**. And a dining room with musical motifs will differentiate the sexes as **BASSES** and **SOPRANOS**.

In the offices of the Los Angeles Rams the ladies' powder room is identified by the sign **EWES**.

Restroom signs with unfamiliar names distinguishing the sexes sometimes lead to embarrassing situations. One young couple visited a nightclub furnished in cowboy style. After a while the city-bred girl excused herself

to go to the powder room, but she returned quickly, her face flushed. "John," she said, "I'm completely confused. Tell me, am I a heifer or a steer?"

This girl's failure to distinguish the sexes was a matter of ignorance, but no such uncertainty lies in the *match-maker*, a satiric saying dealing with the most satirized of all subjects—marriage. This ironic matchmaker arranges marriages not for money or pleasure but out of a need for comic justice.

The woman who talks all day deserves a husband who snores all night.

The man who would rather play golf than eat should marry the woman who would rather play bridge than cook.

The woman who says all men are alike should marry the man who says he understands women.

If such mixing of the two sexes seems incompatible in the extreme, what must be said about the incompatibility of *indefinite gender* where only one sex is mixed?

A circus performer was once heard to remark, "The half-man and half-woman is sick. She hasn't been feeling himself lately."

This ties in with the advice received by a pretty, new performer in a small traveling circus. "Since this is my first job in a circus," she said to the manager, "I wonder if you could give me any special pointers to keep me from making mistakes." "Well," suggested the manager, "as a starter, I'd advise you never to undress in front of the bearded lady."

Several years ago the press played up the story of George Jorgensen who was supposed to have been metamorphosed into Christine Jorgensen via a surgical operation. This led to a flurry of topical gags. Most of them were of an off-color variety as hermaphrodite comedy usually is. When a newspaperman was given the brush-

off by Jorgensen, he was quoted at the time as saying, "Who does she think he is?"

Not all indefinite gender is of this sort. A visitor heard a little boy call his cat Ben Hur. "Why do you call your cat by that funny name?" he asked. "He was just plain Ben," explained the lad, "until he had kittens."

One brand of indefinite gender deals with bachelors and babies. A bachelor was visiting a friend whose wife had recently given birth, but he had forgotten the sex of the infant. When the little creature was shown to him, he said, "Well, he's cute, isn't she? It sure looks adorable. Does he object when you hold her?"

Indefinite gender is likely to turn up in the most unlikely places. A backwoods farm journal once advised its readers: If your cow doesn't give milk, sell him.

A stock gag of this type involves an animal of uncertain sex. The best way to tell whether an ostrich is a male or female is to tell it a joke. If he laughs, it's a male; if she laughs, it's a female.

The uncertainties behind indefinite gender turn naturally to the *gender catch*.

A favorite joke with our grandfathers described how the proverbial traveling salesman stopped at a farmhouse one night and asked for a place to sleep. "I guess we can put you up," said the farmer. "But we've only got two beds. My wife and I sleep in one, and the young schoolteacher sleeps in the other." The salesman smiled. "I wouldn't want to inconvenience you and your wife," he said. "After all, I'm a gentleman." "Good!" replied the farmer. "That will make it easy. The schoolteacher is also a gentleman."

This story has many switches, most of which seem to characterize the jealous wife. A recent version tells how Jones walked into the office of a friend and found him at his desk looking very glum. "Hello, Bill," he said. "What's the matter?" "Oh, just my wife," replied the

other in a depressed tone. "She's engaged a new secretary for me." "Cheer up!" cried Jones with a smile. "There's nothing wrong with that. Is she a blonde or a brunette?" His friend looked up at Jones sadly. "He's bald," he said.

Another variant tells about a wealthy executive who was honeymooning with his former secretary. Upon returning to business he told his bride, "I suppose I'll have to get someone to replace you at the office." "I've been thinking of that, dear," she said. "My cousin has just graduated." "What's her name?" asked her husband. "Joseph David Smith," replied the bride gently.

Gender catches are not all stories. They may be deceptive queries, verbal snares, or other traps that lead the reader to think of one sex when another sex is involved.

A *riddle* testing a person's knowledge of baseball runs somewhat like this: "The bases are loaded. None out. The batter hits a homer. Yet not a man crosses home plate. How is that possible under these conditions?" The answer, of course, is that it's a girl's softball game.

A specimen catchline reads: Bright children don't all grow up into intellectual men—some grow up into women.

Gender latches on to everything, even to remote things like geography. A schoolboy who had struggled through grammar one day and was given an examination in geography the next, answered the question "Name the zones" as follows: The two zones are masculine and feminine. The masculine is either temperate or intemperate, and the feminine is either torrid or frigid.

The last tale in this chapter like the last word deservedly belongs to woman. On a television quiz a contestant was asked what *Hobson's choice* means. His reply was simply, "Mrs. Hobson."

IDIOMATICS

A student came home from college one day and said to his father, "Dad, I need your help. I've got to get something off my chest." "Go ahead, son," replied his father sympathetically. "What is it?" "I want to marry Helen," the young man explained, "but I've got to get something off my chest." He bared his breast on which was indelibly tattooed: I LOVE JUDY.

In this *idiomatic tale* the idiom *get something off my chest* does not mean literally to remove something from that part of the body, but figuratively to unburden oneself of some difficulty by talking about it. All idioms like this one say what they mean but do not mean what they say. Playing the figurative sense of an idiom against the literal sense of its words is one of the many tricks which make up the comic art of idiomatics.

Charles Lamb, the English poet and punster, used to be a focal figure of linguicomedy during the last century, and some of the anecdotes concerning him were idiomatic. On a wet and chilly day in London, he was accosted by a beggar. "Please, sir," pleaded the impoverished creature, "bestow a little charity on a poor, destitute woman. Believe me, sir, I have seen better days." "So have I," replied Lamb, handing the poor thing a shilling. "It's a miserable day, even for London."

Of all species of idiomatic humor, the *literalism* is the

most extensive. As in the above stories, it is a witticism in which figurative language is interpreted in matter-of-fact terms. It achieves its ludicrous effects by breaking down figures of speech into the grammatical and logical meanings of the words which comprise them.

When Fortune smiles she never shows her teeth.

To make the hours go faster, use the spur of the moment.

A century ago the literalism was one of the most widely prevalent types of wit. A favorite of the comic papers, it developed distinct species, the most elementary being the simple breakdown of metaphors.

No one has ever seen the shadow of a doubt.

No one has yet been able to measure a far cry.

Another pattern, less elementary but more playful, extended the logical meaning of the words.

The young lady who burst into tears has been put together again.

The girl who swept the room with a glance didn't make it any cleaner.

With time, such literalisms grew up and appealed to more discriminating minds.

The man who is looking for a helping hand can always find one—attached to his arm.

Idiomatic slips were also introduced, like typographical errors:

Mrs. Jones has entirely recovered from her broken collarbone but her knee is still in the hands of the doctor.

Certain literalisms comprise distinct patterns, like the *exerciser*. This saying begins with the expression "The only exercise some men (or women) get is . . ." and ends with an idiom.

The only exercise some women get is running up bills.

The only exercise some men get is wrestling with their conscience.

The only exercise some women get is jumping at conclusions.

These sometimes appear as exercises in which one form of idiomatic calisthenics follows another.

The only exercises some people get are stretching the truth, bending over backwards, running out of cash, etc.

In another species of closely grouped exercises, double entendre on the word "exercise" takes the place of idioms.

Some people confine their mental activities to exercising tact, self-control, discretion, etc.

There are two classes of idioms—the *metaphorical* and the *non-metaphorical*. The first class embraces picturesque expressions.

A chip off the old block is often a blockhead.

The skeleton in the closet is usually in the shape of a whiskey bottle.

The best way to *turn a woman's head* is to tell her she has a beautiful profile.

The non-metaphorical idioms do not call up mental images. These non-literal phrases are often verb-adverb combinations. The verb *come*, for example, comprises more than a score of idioms—come across, come to, come up with, etc.

If your hair starts to give you trouble, don't worry; it will *come out* all right.

A woman in love *goes into* ecstasy; a man *goes into* details.

The trouble with a bathing suit is that it *shows you off* or *shows you up*.

Any word may lend itself to the play of both classes of idioms.

Metaphorical: A wallflower always has her romances *nipped in the bud*.

Non-metaphorical: A wallflower's ambition is to *grow on* a man.

Every idiom opens many doors to wit. A metaphorical specimen like *leave no stone unturned* may be twisted to describe the masseuse who leaves no stern untuned; the son of a beachcomber who leaves no tern unstoned; and the antipunster who leaves no pun ungroaned.

Bernard Shaw once described a music hall critic as "a man who leaves no turn unstoned."

Then there was the American courtesan Belle Livingstone who, at the end of her fabulous, wayward life wrote that she wished to rest beneath a tombstone reading, "This is the only stone I have left unturned."

Variations are likewise played on non-metaphorical idioms. To *call a spade a spade* is the starting point of pointed twists—the stutterer who calls a spade a s-s-s-p-p-pade; the blunt individual who calls a spade a dirty shovel; the highbrow who calls a spade an agricultural implement; and the man who had always called a spade a spade—until he tripped over one.

Sometimes an idiom is cleverly made to carry both literal and figurative meanings.

It is not only a man's sins but his creditors that will find him out.

In recent years idiomatics has discovered a new playground—the gaglines under cartoons. A motorist asks the desk clerk at a small motel: "Have you suitable accommodations where I can put up with my wife?"

The *idiomatic gag* often begins with a metaphor and ends with a comeback bearing a literal interpretation.

Two men who had been celebrating for hours started home. One asked, "Won't your wife hit the ceiling when you get home?" The other replied, "She probably will. She's an awful shot."

A woman was bragging about her new home ad nauseam. "And the bathroom," she went on, "is simply out of this world." "Really?" interrupted her bored listener. "That makes it slightly inconvenient, doesn't it?"

The term *twisted idiom* refers to any type of idiom which has been turned into an amusing expression. Twisted idioms are a perpetual feast of descriptive wit served on all levels of English, especially proverbial sayings—like hitting the fingernail on the head; killing two birds with one stun; and putting your best foot forward inch by inch.

In the *repeating idiom* a phrase is used once as a figurative and again as a non-figurative specimen.

The poet of old used to take in the beauties of Nature while his wife used to take in washing.

There's a close connection between getting up in the world and getting up in the morning.

The repeating idiom may even be put to triple use.

The best thing to give up on New Year's Eve is to give up giving up.

In the *illustrated idiom* an example wittily illustrates a familiar phrase.

There are things that go without saying, like the fellow who's too bashful to propose.

Another person who makes both ends meet is the infant who sucks his toes.

Idioms lie at the core of many a conditional clause, a device often employed in the service of epigrammar.

If you feel down and out, step into an elevator.

The universal technique of *reversal* operates as extensively in idiomatics as in other branches of humor. The backward man who referred to the color of another horse, and who said that he felt like a head with its chicken cut off, belongs in the same class as the waiter who looks you over from toe to tip, the braggart with whom it's no sooner done than said, and the smart aleck with cheek in his tongue.

The reversible idiom supplies sayings on all subjects.

When a girl wears a sweater, she pulls a man's eyes over the wool.

At a bar, conversations are always budding in the nip.

The noblest of all dogs is the hot dog because it feeds the hand that bites it.

A well-known limerick exploits this linguistic trick:

A cheerful old bear at the zoo
 Could always find something to do;
 When it bored him, you know,
 To walk to and fro,
 He reversed it, and walked fro and to.

This transposition brings to mind the woman who used a substituted idiom in describing the view from her summer hotel: "I can look out of my window and watch the sailboats glide pro and con."

Antonymous idioms are even more prevalent than the reversible species. They are usually put together by linking verbs with adverbs. In *Hamlet*, for instance, Shakespeare contrasts *in* and *out* by having his sententious old courtier Polonius counsel his servant, "By indirections we find directions out."

One familiar means is to counterpoint antonymous idioms by joining contrasting adverbs, like *in* and *out*, to the same verb.

Some girls go in for petting while others go out for it.

A bachelor is a man who has taken out many a girl, but has never been taken in.

Parents first wonder how their children will turn out, and then wonder when they will turn in.

Another established usage is to contrast both the verbs and their adverbs.

When a man is taken in, he is likewise put out.

An eavesdropper loves to listen in, but not as much as she loves to talk out.

In a joint checking account, the husband puts the money in and the wife draws the money out.

A favorite among wordplayers is the antonymous pair *find in* and *find out*.

If you want to find a girl out, call when she isn't in.

"My wife and I get on perfectly," boasted a man of the world. "I never find her in, and she never finds me out."

An antonymous idiom made up of *in* and *out* as prepositions rather than adverbs is *in one ear and out the other*. Roger Price, the humorist, once wrote a funny book entitled *In One Head & Out the Other*. Out of this familiar phrase wits have described the fashion that goes

in one year and out the other; the craze that goes in one era and out the other; and the scandal that goes in one ear and out through the mouth.

The adverbial pair *up* and *down*, attached to the same or contrasting verbs, is also fruitful in the creation of antonymous idioms.

An onion builds you up physically but tears you down socially.

Two things are bad for the heart—running up stairs and running down people.

Many a motorist speeds up when he is behind you so he can slow down when he gets in front of you.

Idioms having the same verbs may be played against each other even if their different adverbs are not antonymous.

Many a philanthropist gives away what he should be giving back.

A failure never puts things over because he is always putting things off.

Sometimes a metaphorical idiom is set against a non-figurative specimen, as we have already noticed, but more often the wit lies in a double metaphor.

One way to know where the shoe pinches is to foot the bills.

Hitting the ceiling is the worst way of getting up in the world.

A diplomat can keep his shirt on while getting something off his chest.

The *triple idiom* comprises a group of three interrelated figurative or non-figurative examples.

The man whose feet are on the ground but whose head is in the clouds should pull himself together.

The *somatic saying*, a witticism that compares or connects different parts of the human body, is often a double metaphor.

It's hard for a man to keep his chin up when his nose is always at the grindstone.

People who are always pointing fingers rarely hold out their hands.

The *metaphorical gag* is a dialogue built around a double metaphor, with the figurative interplay on both sides of the conversation piece.

"What is your opinion of marriage after ten years on the sea of matrimony?" the husband was asked. "Well," he deliberated, "sometimes I wish I had missed the boat."

Then there was the man who said to another, "I loaned Jones twenty dollars last night. He said he was stranded high and dry." "That's odd," replied the other. "I loaned him twenty dollars because he said he could hardly keep his head above water."

Another technique which enriches idiomatics is *splitting*. Its wit springs from the separation of the key words of a familiar phrase. One type expresses the idiom before splitting it.

Some men are always up and doing—up to mischief and doing everyone.

The man who remarks that it goes without saying, goes right ahead and says it anyway.

A prisoner asked his cellmate why he had been jailed. "It was an open and shut case," replied the newcomer. "My lawyer opened his mouth, and then they shut me up."

Because their keywords contradict or negate each other, antonymous idioms are adapted more readily to splitting than others.

Life is a matter of ups and downs—keeping appearances up and expenses down.

Alcoholics like other men have their ups and downs: they are first brought up on a bottle and then brought down by one.

This last specimen illustrates the overlapping so commonly found in linguicomedry. It is not only a split idiom but also an illustrated idiom, an antonymous idiom, a double idiom.

Another type of split idiom breaks up the phrase without first expressing it.

Some women would be more spic if they had less span.

Accidentally meeting an acquaintance after several years, a girl said, "I never imagined you'd marry the man you did." "Neither did I," answered the other. "I disliked his ways but I adored his means."

Idiom splitting also helps rhyme and verse to show off its cleverness.

Come weal, come woe,
My status is quo.

We now come to a class of idioms so prolific that it must be given summary treatment. The *punning idiom* embraces an incalculable diversity of puns and idioms, many of which have already served to exemplify different types. It is the conversion of the keyword of an idiom into a playword, changed or unchanged in sound or usage.

The proverbial sailor is a wolf in ship's clothing.

A lawyer hates to sit on a jury but loves to sit on a witness.

The only thing that can go out every night without looking dissipated is an electric light bulb.

It is always beastly weather when it rains cats and dogs.

The birth of a baby girl was double-punned in a telegram reading: We Have Skirted the Issue.

A realtor was about to close the sale of a house. "One final question," asked the prospective buyer. "Do I have to pay extra for the shutters and awnings?" "No, not at all," replied the realtor. "They're on the house."

A single idiom may give rise to a multitude of such puns especially when it becomes a verbal vogue. Horse-racing, once the sport of kings and now the king of sports, recently gave birth to a new breed of wordplay based on the idiom *out of*. This is a parody twist on race-horse foaling. When we refer to a colt by Snowbridge out of Dawn, for example, we simply mean that the colt whose sire is Snowbridge was born of a dam named Dawn. By punning through this idiomatic pattern we bring forth racehorses like Relapse by Patient out of Bed, or Pink Elephant by Whiskey out of Bottle.

The possibilities of such horseplay are endless: Earache by Piano out of Tune; Blah-Blah by Public Speaker out of Ideas; Anger by Parent out of Patience; Silence by Telephone out of Order; Pastime by Calendar out of Date; Dyspepsia by Stomach out of Sorts; Fatality by Doctor out of Practice; Putrid by Oyster out of Season.

It is impossible to run out of such racehorse parodies because *out of* idioms represent many distinct ideas. Here briefly is a list of such idioms for punsters who might be interested in adding a horse or two of another color to those given above: Out of work, out of breath, out of respect, out of favor, out of fashion, out of con-

trol, out of curiosity, out of reach, out of doors, out of funds.

The *macaronic idiom* is a bilingual pun, a familiar phrase in one language slightly changed by another language. Typical of Latinisms modified by English is the description of the income tax as *tax vobiscum*.

No skirt should be so short as to expose the *knee plus ultra*.

Humbert Wolfe, the English poet-punster, once damned a dame in politics as a *virago intacta*.

The *idiomatic definition*, blended into the nonce-word *definidiom*, is any definition involving the clever use of an idiom.

impresario. The only man who never suffers in the long run.

juvenile delinquent. A youngster who has been given a free hand but not in the proper place.

bar. A place where the man who feels down in the mouth makes liquor share it with him.

The comic interchange in idioms of the singular and plural forms of words is called *idiomatic number*.

A salesmanager earns his living by being a slave to conventions.

The trick lies in choosing an idiomatic noun of more than one meaning so that the substituted form differs in sense as well as number. A recent cartoon shows a chorus girl talking to another with the gagline reading: "And when I threatened to tell his wife, you should have seen the furs fly."

In these specimens only the plural number is expressed, the singular being implied. Sometimes both forms interplay, as in epigrammatical number.

Life isn't all beer and skittles; few of us have touched a skittle in years.

Paraphrased idioms are the constant recourse of popular caricature, the variety of such twists being inexhaustible. The architect who suffers from an edifice complex; the arsonist who pours oil on troubled fires; the salesman who needs to have the wind taken out of his sales; the man who spells Kennedy with only one *n* because he can't make *n*'s meet—these are typical members of the vast brotherhood of idiomatics.

LEXICOGRAPHY

Lexicographers are the sworn enemies of humorous English. Since Dr. Johnson's English dictionary two centuries ago, dictionary-makers have forsworn wit and comedy in their definitions though forced to include them as entries. But humorous English has an intrusive way about it, and weaves itself into the most unwanted places. And so we find a constant stream of comedy about English dictionaries and their definitions.

The classic, of course, is the story that tells how Mrs. Webster once accidentally walked into a room and found her husband kissing the maid. "Noah!" she exclaimed, "I'm surprised." Noah, ever the verbalist, was nonplussed. "No, my dear," he corrected. "It is *I* who am surprised. *You* are astonished."

A young stenographer from Georgia got a job in Washington, and wrote to her folks back home about the liaison work she was doing for government officials. Not knowing what the word *liaison* meant, they looked it up in the dictionary, and at once wired their daughter to return home. This is the definition they found: "LIAISON—An intimacy, especially unlawful, between a man and a woman."

Variety is the word for the contents of dictionaries as well as the stories about them. Many specimens are merely dictionary slips in defining words, a minor brand

of humorous English used as fillers in the *New Yorker* magazine. Others are blunders like the woman who asked a bookseller for a Latin dictionary because she planned a trip to Latin America.

A story is told about a secretary who kept turning pages back and forth in a dictionary until a co-worker finally asked what word she was trying to find. "Bankruptcy," said the secretary. "Then why are you looking under the r's?" asked the other. "I know how to spell bank," explained the secretary, "and now I'm looking for ruptcy."

I have defined a comic dictionary as a happy medium of information, and as a book that plays on plays on words. But of course it is much more than that. Modesty does not stop me from directing the reader to my own *Comic Dictionary*, which contains many thousands of definitions, as the only source of information on the history and nature of humorous lexicography.

Comic definitions are usually described by punning twists on the word *definition*. Among these names are daffynitions, daftinitions, laffinitions, de-fun-itions, deftinitions.

In humorous lexicography the word dictionary is usually defined as the only place where certain things can always be found, like happiness, and where things precede and follow one another in reverse order. Thursday comes after Friday, divorce comes before marriage, and pride goeth after, not before, destruction.

A related type of definition explains a word with regard to the dictionary.

gratitude. Something rarely found outside the dictionary.

invest. A word which comes before *investigate* in the dictionary, but which follows it in practice.

cynic. A person who believes that sincerity can be found only in the dictionary.

The term *daffynition* applies to the not-so-comic definition in popular comedy, being restricted normally to the lowest levels.

indorse. Where people stay in nasty weather.

barium. What is done to the dead.

buccaneer. Overpaying for corn on the cob.

It must have been wit of this kind that provoked Benjamin Disraeli's cry, "I hate definitions!"

Slightly above this level is the literal species of the *splitword definition*. It defines a word according to the units suggested by its parts or syllables.

timetable. A table bought on the credit plan.

tangent. A man just back from Florida.

castanet. What a fisherman does to catch fish.

The splitword definition covers a variety of verbal splits. It is often an explanation dividing a compound word into two within a clever context.

standpatter. A man whose most annoying trait is not his stand but his patter.

playsuit. A garment that has more play than suit.

mugwump. An animal that sits on the fence with its mug on one side and its wump on the other.

The splitword definition may also explain a compound word whose division is implied.

carnation. America's national flower.

lowbrow. The man whose toupee has slipped over his forehead.

abet. A term that sometimes means to aid but more often to gamble.

All compounds, genuine as well as artificial, may be fractured in comic lexicography. This is also true of the

simple splits in which nothing is interposed between the separate parts of a word.

chicken. A chic hen.

useless. The things we ought to use less.

Other splitword constructions may also properly be included under this species of lexicography.

borrower. A person who always wants to be left a loan.

atoll. A body of coral surrounded by water that isn't an island at all.

There are many types of *pun definitions* with well-defined differences. The most prevalent is the punning explanation of a word.

ferryboat. A boat that makes every passenger cross.

public speaker. A man who loves a wordy cause.

elevator. Another thing that always gives you a lift.

The interplay between a term and its explanation is also the basis of such definitions.

butterfly. A flutterby.

press agent. A praise agent.

jellyfish. A fish that gets its jelly from ocean currents.

A third group defines the word *pun* by means of a pun. Thus, a pun is a speaking likeness; it is a form of humor or less; it is a brand of humor seldom as witless as the man who groans at it.

Then there is the type in which the word *pun* is cleverly defined without resorting to a pun. Samples: A pun is a form of wit without humor. A pun is a form of humor that goes over with a groan. A pun is the lowest form of humor, especially when the laugh is on you.

Other species of pun definitions are described under their proper names in other chapters.

In the *analogical definition* an animal, vegetable or inanimate object is described in analogous terms of another animal, vegetable or thing.

The animal kingdom lends itself to many such descriptive changes. A caterpillar is an upholstered worm, a giraffe is a rubberneck cow, and a peacock is a turkey in full bloom.

Analogical definitions are also abundant in the vegetable kingdom, commonly exemplifying plants grown for food. An eggplant is a pumpkin with apoplexy, tobacco is lettuce with a suntan, and a grapefruit is an orange with a swelled head.

Other definitions present analogies between everyday things. A pillow is a nap sack, the harp is a piano in the nude, and the sun is a skylight.

Such definitions are often puns in the form of verbal compounds and combinations, and are called *transformers*. Samples: An iceberg is a permanent wave; a temperance lecture is a waterspout; love is a heartburn; a banana skin is a golden slipper; a mustard plaster is a bosom friend; a bustle is a false bottom; and a radio is a chatter box.

In the *linking definition* two adjacent words are so joined in speech that their sounds suggest different words and thus convey different meanings.

mole. A very small animal that cannot see, but not on account of its size.

policeman. A never-present help in time of trouble.

nudist camp. A place where every morning brings the dawn of a nude day.

The *homonymic definition* is based on words having the same pronunciation but differing in meaning and usually in spelling.

luck. The idol of the idle.

patriot. A man who often waves the flag, but more often waives what it stands for.

rooming house. The place where roomers spread rumors about other roomers.

Many definitions are little more than the play between a word and its implied homonym, like the explanation of a hobo as a road's scholar, the movies as reel life, or car-rion as something having an offal smell.

The wit of the *paradox definition* lies in its contradictory or paradoxical use of words.

painting. Something which, when well done, is rare.

antique. Something so old that it is worth more than it really is.

Persons as well as things are often the subjects of such contradiction.

smart aleck. A man who knows it all but has lots to learn.

hypochondriac. A woman who is terribly unhappy when she is happy.

Another species of paradox definition explains a word and then negates it.

alibi. Being somewhere where you are not.

preserves. Fruit that you preserve because you cannot preserve it.

exercise. The work a person likes to do because it is not work.

The *massed definition* groups three or more elements into a fused and facetious whole. A good example is Philip Guedalla's definition of biography as a region bounded on the north by history, on the south by fiction, on the east by obituary, and on the west by tedium.

traffic. Too many people in too many cars in too much of a hurry going in too many directions.

Broadway. A place where people spend money they haven't earned, to buy things they don't need, to impress people they don't like.

Ambrose Bierce practiced this art of grouping, with most of his massed definitions being concocted out of a bitter brew.

history. An account, mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves and soldiers mostly fools.

lecturer. One with his hand in your pocket, his tongue in your ear, and his faith in your patience.

faith. Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge, of things without parallel.

An important member of this family of massing is the *climax definition*. It is built upon a climactic arrangement in which the last of three ideas gives an amusing twist to the series.

love. A word made up of two vowels, two consonants, and two fools.

divorce. The proof that some people marry for love, some for money, but most for a short time.

playboy. A man who winters in Florida, summers in Canada, and springs at blondes.

The *alliterative definition* needs no defining. The best-known specimen is Oliver Wendell Holmes's definition of afternoon tea as "giggle, gabble, gobble, git."

philosophy. A pompous parade of prolix perplexity.

novel. An indefinite idea in infinite ink.

nose. A feature of the face that snoops, snubs, sniffs and sneezes.

Like alliteration, all comic techniques contribute to the complex character of humorous lexicography. Another involves repetition like doubling or tripling. One brand of *repeating definition* is the simple possessive. A fluke is the accident of an accident, an inkling is the suggestion of a suggestion, and the outskirts are the suburbs of the suburbs.

The repeating definition is not limited to such elementary doubling but embraces all kinds of doubling or tripling.

backseat driver. The driver who drives the driver.

bore. A person who takes his time taking your time.

club. The place where you feel more at home than at home.

The *reversible definition* takes the form of an amusing transposition.

woman. A creature who is either making a fool out of a man, or making a man out of a fool.

hiker. A person who walks to reduce, or who is reduced to walking.

diplomacy. The art of saying something when you have nothing to say, or of saying nothing when you have something to say.

The explanation of a word by means of a clever example is called the *illustrated definition*.

irony. Giving father a billfold for Christmas.

thoughtfulness. Holding the door open for your wife while she carries in a load of groceries.

patriotism. The frustration you feel when a foreigner wins the championship.

Another species begins with a non-comic synonym or explanation, followed by a clever example.

aberration. A mental disorder, like a midget with an inferiority complex.

frugal. Economical or thrifty, like the frugal fisherman who married a woman with worms.

persuade. To convince, like the man who persuaded his wife to sympathize with the girl who lost her bra in his car.

There are certain types of definitions where the choice of a particular word lies at the core of its wit. The *exceptive definition* is one of these. Its comic element depends upon the reservation of a general explanation, the proviso beginning with *except*, *unless* or *but*.

insurance. The business of protecting you against everything—except the insurance agent.

planned economy. An economic plan that includes everything but economy.

flirt. A girl who never talks to strangers—unless they are men.

Another type is the *especial definition* in which the explanation of a word is followed by a special example that proves it. This is the counterpart of the exceptive definition in which an exception disproves the rule.

philanderer. A man who loves his neighbor, especially his neighbor's wife.

whistle. A dangerous device for motorists, especially when used by traffic cops and locomotives.

Some types open with a standard verbal pattern. The *exclusive definition* begins with "the only thing."

silence. The only thing that can't be misquoted.

secret. The only thing that circulates more rapidly than money.

success. The only thing some people won't forgive in a friend.

The *differential definition* also follows a fixed opening. It sets two things apart and begins with "the difference between."

fence. The difference between one yard and two yards.
plenty. The difference between democracy and communism.

failure. The difference between one and one's egotism.

In the *proof definition* the statement presented as evidence is always preceded by the opening phrase "the proof that."

widow. The proof that women live longer than men.
witness stand. The proof that the truth is many-sided.
abstract art. The proof that things are not as bad as they are painted.

This stylized quip is often clothed in the refashioned garments of a twisted proverb.

miser. The proof that not every fool and his money are soon parted.

There are fixed verbal closings as well as openings in humorous lexicography. The *success definition* ends with the phrase "that made good." This type describes a superior object as the successful outcome of something inferior, and is related to the transformer and class definitions.

A sarong is a bathtowel that made good, a tea wagon is a pushcart that made good, a helicopter is an egg-beater that made good.

The *class definition* is expressed in terms of class distinction or something higher in expense, rank or importance. A steamer basket is a de luxe lunch basket, philanthropy is charity through a press agent, Salisbury steak is hamburger at a higher price.

Another species of class definition bears a cultural rather than social base. It all started with Mark Twain. "Training is everything," he once epigrammed; "cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education." Soon a host of parallelograms imitated his phrasing.

A theory is nothing but a hunch with a college education.

Most of these sayings apply to persons, and were quickly converted into definitions. An agriculturist is a farmer with a college education, a sanitary engineer is a plumber with a college education, a philatelist is a stamp collector with a college education, and a kleptomaniac is a shoplifter with a college education.

The "*poor man's*" definition, the reverse of the class definition, explains a poor man's possession or preference in terms of something superior.

Coca-Cola is the poor man's cocktail, a cat is the poor man's tiger, an excursion is the poor man's cruise.

The *macaronic definition* explains a foreign phrase in clever English, the explanation being suggested as a rule by the sound or semblance of the phrase in English.

sic transit. Latin for a stormy ocean voyage.

pièce de résistance. French for a tough steak.

Meum et tuum. A Latin phrase meaning me too.

Sometimes this definition avoids soundplay and resorts to other kinds of wit.

enfant terrible. A child who never tells a lie.

status quo. A phrase used to describe the mess we're in.

hors d'oeuvres. A sandwich cut up into a hundred pieces.

The samples described in this and other chapters are only a small number among the scores of definition types,

but enough to indicate their variety. Though serious lexicography is a recognized science, humorous lexicography is *terra incognita*, a field of linguicomedy explored here for the first time.

Unlike their non-comic counterparts, the number of types of comic definitions is as inexhaustible as humor itself. But there are other basic differences too. Although every word has a serious meaning, only familiar words carry amusing meanings, for the *sine qua non* of humor is common knowledge and experience. A word like *carious*, for example, may be entered and defined in an unabridged dictionary but it is too unfamiliar to lend itself to comic definition. Thus, only a small percentage of our English vocabulary can serve the purposes of humorous lexicography.

On the other hand, every common word has only one serious meaning or few, whereas there is no limit to the number of amusing meanings that may be given to it. Many definitions have been given to love and marriage, husband and wife, and related butts of satire. Thus, it is possible to create more comic definitions than serious ones even though fewer words are defined. I myself have created a new definition every day for over a decade for my syndicated newspaper feature *Comic Dictionary*.

AMBIGUITY

Nothing in English has been ridiculed as much as the ambiguous use of words, unless it be the ambiguous use of sentences. Ben Franklin said, "Clearly spoken, Mr. Fogg. You explain English by Greek." Richard Brinsley Sheridan said, "I think the interpreter is the hardest to be understood of the two." And a witty American journalist remarked over a century ago what is even more true today, "Many a writer seems to think he is never profound except when he can't understand his own meaning."

There are many types of ambiguity and many of them have been described by rhetoricians under such names as amphibology, parisology, and other ologies. In common parlance they would be described as misses—misinterpreters, misunderstanders, misdirectors and kindred misdeeds.

One species of ambiguity tries to baffle by interweaving repetition. "Did you or did you not say what I said you said, because Jane said you never said what I said?"

Another woman, addressing Christmas cards, said to her husband: "We sent them one last year but they didn't send us one, so they probably won't send us one this year because they'll think we won't send them one because they didn't last year, don't you think, or shall we?"

Such ambiguous exercises compound confusion by making it worse compounded, and they are sometimes

expanded until the cream of the jest sours. Ambiguity of a non-repetitious kind describes the dilemma one girl found herself in. "I'm terribly upset," she told a girlfriend. "I wrote Bill in my last letter to forget that I had told him that I didn't mean to reconsider my decision not to change my mind—and he seems to have misunderstood me." Evidently Bill was another of those men who simply don't understand women.

Another case involves a newspaper reporter who tripped up a politician. "Mr. Jones, you may recall that we printed last week your denial of having retracted the contradiction of your original statement. Now would you care to have us say that you were misquoted in regard to it?"

Questions like this, framed in verbal fog, are perhaps the only kind that have ever stumped an experienced politician. They recall Byron's classic comment: "I wish he would explain his explanation." Similarly, when a reporter once questioned Lincoln in cryptic fashion, Lincoln refused to make any further statement. "I fear explanations explanatory of things explained," he said, leaving the biter bit—and bitter.

The obscurity of politicians may not always be as innocent as it looks. "Senator," said an interviewer, "your constituents can't understand from your speech last night just how you stand on the question." "Good!" replied the Senator. "It took me five hours to write it that way."

The *misplaced modifier* is another species more honored in the observance of obscurity than in the breach. This creates an amusing effect because its position in a sentence seems to make it apply to the wrong word. A verse familiar to all grammarians is the quatrain:

I saw a man once beat his wife
When on a drunken spree.

Now can you tell me who was drunk—
The man, his wife, or me?

The "wooden-leg" gag of vaudeville, another stand-by of this sort, had endless variations.

"There's a man outside with a wooden leg named Smith."

"What's the name of his other leg?"

Another stock vaudeville gag ran: "Mother is home sick in bed with the doctor."

When radio came in, it continued the misplaced modifier in its routines as a standard device.

"Do you see that pretty girl standing next to the car with slacks on?"

"I see the girl but I don't see the car with slacks on."

In recent years gagwriters have discovered this brand of blunder and thus the misplaced modifier has acquired a new habitat in the gagline. In one cartoon a family is shown outside a theater with the head of the family addressing the doorman: "Excuse me, but when we came out we found that we had left my daughter's handbag and my wife's behind."

Journalism supplies us with an endless run of such slips. Not long ago a newspaper advised those taking part in a contest that "snapshots must be of a person not larger than 8 x 10 inches."

Classified ads are also chockfull of *misrelated constructions*. Readers of the *Reader's Digest* are familiar with such items which often appear in its lists of verbal slips, like the ad in a California paper that advertised "House for rent. View takes in five counties, two bedrooms."

Since brevity is the soul of ambiguity as well as wit, newspaper *headlines* continually provide us with amusing samples.

Officials Meet on Rubbish.
Many Shapes in Bathtubs.
Son and Daughter of Local Couple Married.

Apart from misplaced modifiers and headlines, journalism contributes a wide variety of comic ambiguities in both editorial and advertising matter.

A weekly newspaper reported a local romance: ". . . and the couple were married last Saturday, thus ending a friendship which began in their schooldays."

An item in the letters column of a newspaper renewed a subscription, adding: "I personally enjoy your newspaper as much as my husband."

Then there was the caterer's ad which read: "ARE YOU GETTING MARRIED OR HAVING AN AFFAIR? We have complete facilities to accommodate 200 people."

The newspaper too is the favorite habitat of the *anatomical*. This slip is so-called because its semi-ambiguous English always seems to refer to a person's anatomy but never quite means what it seems to say. Samples: He walked in upon her invitation. She kissed him passionately upon his reappearance. He kissed her back.

Not without good reason has the anatomical been called jocular journalese. In news items a man is less often shot in the body or head than in the suburbs. "While Henry Morgan was escorting Miss Vera Green from the church social last Saturday night, a savage dog attacked them and bit Mr. Morgan on the public square."

Such items recall the California journalist who reported an accident involving a movie star: "The area in which Miss N— was injured is spectacularly scenic."

The double meaning in the anatomical made it a familiar vaudeville device, as in the gags of Weber and Fields. When a witness at court was asked if he had been kicked in the ensuing rumpus, he replied, "No, it was in the

stomach." Strangely enough, this always brought the house down.

Apart from journalese and vaudeville gags, the anatomical is also found in jocular literature. A conscientious girl became the secretary of a doctor. Her first day at work she was puzzled by an entry in the doctor's notes on an emergency case. It read: "Shot in the lumbar region." After a moment of thought, her mind cleared and, in the interest of clarity, she typed into the record: "Shot in the woods."

There are many grammatical misconstructions other than dangling modifiers and anatomicals which permit two different interpretations. At the home of a gourmet the new maid was instructed in the fine points of serving. "I want the fish served whole, with head and tail," the epicure explained, "and serve it with lemon in mouth." The maid demurred. "That's silly—lemon in mouth," she said. But since the gourmet insisted that it is done that way at the most fashionable dinners, the girl reluctantly agreed. So she brought the fish in whole, and she carried a lemon in her mouth.

Another specimen of such double-entendre is illustrated by a woman in a department store. She said to the saleslady, "I want a dress to put on around the house." The puzzled saleslady inquired, "How large is your house, Madam?"

This saleslady was a failure in the dress department and was transferred to the shoe department. When a customer asked for alligator shoes, she said, "What size is your alligator?"

The *comic indefinite* comprises an extensive class of comedy. One species is restricted to statements which are neither explicit nor precise regarding a particular person, place, time or thing. A woman met a famous author at a literary tea. "Oh, I'm so delighted to meet

you," she gushed. "It was only the other day that I saw something of yours, about something or other, in some magazine."

This baffling lack of distinct details recalls the secretary whose employer was leaving the office and told her what to answer if anyone called in his absence. "I may be back," he explained, "and then again, I may not." The girl nodded understandingly. "Yes, sir," she said, "is that definite?"

An old-fashioned mother said to her modern daughter, "You must have gotten in quite late last night, dear. Where were you?" The daughter replied, "Oh, I had dinner with—well, you don't know him but he's awfully nice—and we went to a couple of places—I don't suppose you've heard of them—and we finished up at a cute little night club—I forget the name of it. Why, it's all right, isn't it, Mother?" Her woolly-minded parent agreed. "Of course, dear," she said. "It's only that I like to know where you go."

No less ambiguous was the indefiniteness of a certain clergyman's sermon. "Dearly beloved," he preached, "unless you repent of your sins in a measure, and become converted to a degree, you will, I regret to say, be damned to a more or less extent." This clergyman should have referred to Shakespeare's dictum: "So-so is a good, very good, very excellent maxim. And yet it is not. It is but so-so."

Indefinite reference also carries double-meaning where an allusion to one person or thing seems to refer to another. A news item described the launching of a ship: "Completing the ceremony, the beautiful movie star smashed a bottle of champagne over her stern as she slid gracefully down the ways into the sea."

This is not unlike the order received by the sergeant of an army motor pool: "Four trucks to Fort Mason

gym, 7:30 tonight, for hauling girls to dance. The bodies must be cleaned and seats wiped off."

A politician was approached by a man seeking the office of a minor public official who had just died. "What are my chances for taking Joe's place?" he asked. "If you can fix it up with the undertaker," returned the politician, "it's all right with me."

The manager of a movie theater received a telephone call from a woman who was equally indefinite. "What have you got on today?" she inquired. "A blue suit," he answered. "Who's in it?" she continued. "I am," he said. There was a short pause for reflection. "Oh," said the woman, "I've seen that picture already."

Another brand of indefinite reference arises out of the use of the *double verb*. When a question contains two verbs, the response does not make clear which of them is being answered.

The moonlit night was made for romance, and he had been looking at her soulfully for some time. Finally he asked, "Do you object to petting?" "That's one thing I've never done," she said promptly. He thought a moment, then inquired, "You mean petted?" "No," she smiled, "objected."

Replies to requests for character reference are notorious for their evasive double-entendre. It would be hard to find anything more equivocal than: "I cannot recommend him too highly."

Another less ambiguous case read as follows: "The bearer of this letter has served me for two years to his complete satisfaction. If you are thinking of giving him a berth, be sure to make it a wide one."

In the comedy of indefinite reference, *it-wit* occupies a prominent place because of its frequent occurrence. Ambiguity arises when the pronoun *it* carries a twofold reference.

Two friends were talking. One said, "When I get a cold I buy a bottle of whiskey for it, and within a few hours it's gone." The speaker referred to the whiskey but his friend thought he meant the cold.

It-wit is a misnomer because it covers slips as well as wit. An excited woman was making an emergency call over the phone: "Doctor, please come over right away. My husband is in great pain. It's his head. He's had it on and off all day."

Indefinite tit-for-tat is a form of repartee in which a person resorts to the indefinite and is answered similarly in return. A minor classic of American jokelore is worth reproducing here to indicate the currency of such humor a century and more ago. "I say, mister," said a Yankee to a rustic on a country road, "did you see a dog come by here that looked as if he were a year, or a year and a half, or two years old?" "Yes," said the countryman, aware that the other was poking fun at him. "He passed about an hour, or an hour and a half, or two hours ago. And he is now a mile, or a mile and a half, or two miles ahead. And he had a tail about an inch, or an inch and a half, or two inches long. And he—" "That'll do," interrupted the Yankee gruffly and went on his way.

In this brand of tit-for-tat, a person is always given a dose of his own medicine. A man visits a doctor. "I never feel well anymore, I can't say why," he explains. "I get a vague pain I don't know exactly where, and it leaves me in a kind of—I don't know exactly how to describe it." The medico listens attentively, then writes out a prescription. "Here," he says to the patient, "now take this, I don't know how many times a day, for I don't know just how long. You'll feel better after a while—but I really can't say when."

Another extensive class of comic ambiguity covers *juxtaposition*. One brand is the marquee sign that runs

two movie titles or other captions incongruously close together. These are generally of a suggestive or double-entendre nature.

BETWEEN MIDNIGHT AND DAWN – A LADY
TAKES A CHANCE
THE FLEET'S IN – JULIA MISBEHAVES
TWO WEEKS WITH LOVE – EMERGENCY
WEDDING

Marquee juxtaposers are often created by the catalytic action of the word *and* or *with*.

THE BRIDE WORE BOOTS and SELECTED
SHORTS
GEORGE WASHINGTON SLEPT HERE with
ANN SHERIDAN
THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE with THE WEAKER
SEX.

Other signs like church notices lead to ambiguity. A bulletin board outside a church announced Sunday services with a sermon on: "Do You Know What Hell Is?" Underneath was printed in smaller letters: Come and hear our organist.

Above the door of another church was an engraved message that read: "This Is the Gateway to Heaven." Below the message hung a printed sign: "Closed during July and August."

Juxtaposition belongs among the rarer classes of humor in epigrammatic literature.

Members of Congress make the laws, and the chaplain of Congress prays for the country.

On the other hand *non sequiturs* provide many an amusing sample like the newspaper item: Two ladies sang a duet, *The Lord Knows Why*.

Juxtaposition comedy covers everything from book

titles to advertising. One classified ad, a dog-for-sale item, read: Grown boxer. Will eat anything. Especially fond of children.

Linking speech also leads to funny misunderstandings through its ambiguity. This is the kind of utterance in which the final sound of one word and the opening sound of another are so joined or separated as to suggest two different words.

Three reporters were interviewing a woman and one thought she had referred to a reindeer. A second was sure she had said something about "the train dear." The third insisted he had heard her say "trained ear." So the reporters asked her to repeat what she had said. "I told you," she explained, "that I had been out in the country last week end and was asking my husband if it rained here."

Another trio, a group of newly inducted GI's from the Ozarks, were visiting a St. Louis YMCA. After glancing quickly through the magazines and paying a brief visit to the game rooms, they asked the information desk what else the "Y" offered. "There's swimming in the basement," they were told. This seemed to impress them because they quickly stepped aside and went into a lively huddle. Then one of the trio returned to the desk. "Did you say," he asked eagerly, "that there was women in the basement?"

An Anglo-American case of linking speech concerns an American who attended a party in London and had a dance with his hostess. When they finished, the rather corpulent lady was quite breathless but out of politeness he asked her for another dance. "Not now," she replied in a broad Oxford accent, "I'm dahnced out." "Oh, no," he disagreed, "not darn stout at all. You're merely plump."

Ambiguity of this type has a long history. One historic

specimen deserves inclusion here for it spotlights the level of culture of our ancestors and the climate of humor which they enjoyed. John Brougham, an early American dramatist, used to fill his stage plays with innumerable puns. One of the scenes in his stage burlesque *Pocahontas* shows Captain John Smith lying tied up on the ground, and about to be clubbed to death by the warriors of the Indian chief Powhatan. During this tense scene Pocahontas rushes in, crying, "For my husband I scream!" Whereupon Captain Smith raises his head and asks "Lemon or vanilla?"

Since the variety of humorous English based on ambiguity is virtually limitless and since this chapter has already run its allotted length, perhaps the most suitable way to end it is with the *ambiguous epitaph*. This type of inscription can be interpreted in two ways, one grave, the other droll.

Stranger, call this spot not a place
Of fear and gloom;
To me it is a pleasant spot—
It is my husband's tomb.

My wife lies here,
All my tears cannot bring her back.
Therefore I weep.

Although ambiguous epitaphs are often counterfeit, many a genuine specimen is recorded in tombstone literature, like this one:

Faithful husband
Thou art at rest
Until we meet again

SPELLING

Artemus Ward once wrote: "It is a pity that Chawcer, who had geneyus, was so unedicated. He's the wuss speller I know of." This was Artemus Ward's way of showing that he was an even worse speller. As the head of the school that mistook misspelling for humorese, he influenced American comedy for generations. Fortunately Mark Twain, born a year after Ward in 1835, belonged to a more literate school of humor, though he once said: "I don't give a damn for a man who can spell a word in only one way."

Comic license allowed Mark Twain on another occasion to write about the Italians: "They spell it Vinci and pronounce it Vinchi. Foreigners always spell better than they pronounce." The great humorist of course knew spelling gags by the score which disproved his witticism. Foreigners always spell English worse than they pronounce it, and so do Americans.

One of these Americans was Theodore Roosevelt. While President of the United States at the beginning of this century he was converted to *simplified spelling*. He spelled beau bo, and enough enuf. Andrew Carnegie, also a convert, donated large funds to the cause, for which his name was uncharitably misspelled Andru Karnegi.

Mark Twain aimed one of his shafts at these word

reformers that struck home. "Simplified spelling is all right enough," he quipped, "but like chastity you can carry it too far."

Although the non-phonetic spelling of English is the major source of orthographic comedy, there are many other streams of comic spelling. The *spelling bee* is one of these. An eight-year-old sent his parents a postcard from his summer camp which concluded: "We had a spelling be and I'm in the finalls."

Amusing blunders of every type and stripe involve the truncation of words and names. A widower wanted to have something original on his wife's headstone and hit upon, "Lord, she was Thine." He had his own ideas about the size of the letters and the space between words, and gave instructions to the stonemason. The latter carried them out in a satisfactory manner except that he could not get in the *e* in Thine.

There are two main divisions of *misspelling*—the intentional and the unintentional. The errorthography of Artemus Ward and other crackerbarrel philosophers like Josh Billings and Kin Hubbard was of the intentional kind. Playwright George S. Kaufman once observed that there was method in their madness because they always spelled *is* with only one *z*.

Satire often exploits the device of misspelling to point up its ridicule more sharply. A newspaper editor used to hand out cards to his reporters: GET IT RIHGT!

Similarly, a friend of mine described a man who married a shrew as "not shrewd, but shrewed."

The unintentional variety also breeds many an amusing tidbit, like the spelling bee specimen just given. An amateur gardener wrote to the botany department of a state university about the trouble she was having with the scarlet sage flower, the *salvia*. "I have planted saliva in front of my house but it doesn't seem to grow. Please

tell me what to do." Her misspelling provoked a professor to reply: "Madam, I suggest you pull out the saliva and plant spitoonias instead."

Unintentional misspelling provides considerable amusement to students of English. The word *misspell* itself is usually misspelled. In a psychology class students were asked to name their most valuable asset. Two of them wrote intelligence—and both misspelled it. This recalls a letter to a newspaper in which the writer criticized the high school graduates of today because "they can't spell as well as the youngsters did years ago in the sixth grade of grammer school."

Typographical errors, the most fertile source of misspelling comedy, are discussed in the chapter on *Misusage*.

The beginning of all orthographic wit is the juvenile type of alphabet spelling called alphabetese in which words are reduced to their individual letter sounds. The simplest forms are the one-letter substitutes for one-syllable words, like R for are, U for you, and T for tea. Other forms of alphabet spelling resort to double and multiple letters. Empty becomes MT, enemy is spelled NME, and expediency is XPDNC.

Numerical spelling is closely associated with alphabet spelling and they are sometimes seen together in humorese, like b4 and b9.

More inventive than either of these is *analogous spelling* which achieves its playful effects by paralleling standard orthography.

Arthur "Bugs" Baer, the syndicated newspaper paragrapher, resorted to this practice when he described a movie star as "svelte, svete and svlender."

And so did a parodist of Welsh spelling who once wrote about a simple Welsh lad named Lloyd. "I llove you, Lleilla," he whispered. "And I," she faltered, "llove

you." Their lips met. . . . And there the parodist left them.

Another specimen is illustrated in the sign on a highway: *For Sale. Antiques & Junque.*

By the same token Ogden Nash, the master of comic verse, analogized with poetic license:

He who is ridden by a conscience
Worries about a lot of nonsense.

An exam in linguistics once included the question: "Why is psychic spelled with a *p*?" A student who was ignorant of the answer felt he couldn't ignore the question. So he wrote: "It psurely does pseem psilly."

The best-known case of such parallel spelling involves the word *potato*. A whimsical philologist spelled it *ghoughphtheightteeau*, and this is how he explained it. *Gh* stands for *p*, as in hiccough; *ough* stands for *o*, as in dough; *phth* stands for *t*, as in phthisic; *eigh* stands for *a*, as in neighbor; *tte* stands for *t* as in statuette; and *eau* stands for *o*, as in beau.

Less complicated is the attempt to ridicule non-phonetic English by the word *fish*. Through analogy, the word may be spelled *ghoti*—*gh* in enough sounding like *f*, *o* in women sounding like *i*, and *ti* in motion sounding like *sh*.

Even simpler is the name of a comic strip about a philosophical mongrel—*Phydeaux*.

The same technique of analogous spelling invades humorous lexicography. A word that has an odd spelling is defined by giving words a similar spelling pattern.

llama. An animal that llooks llike a camel.

aardvark. Aan aanimal that resembles aan aanteater.

Not all specimens of such *definition spelling* are confined to animals. Generally words or phrases of foreign

extraction, like gypsy, igloo and bazaar, which have unusual spellings, lend themselves to it.

Zuider Zee. A gulf in zentral Netherlands now zeparated by a dike from the North Zee.

fjord. A fjorm of estuary bjordered by steep cliffs, especially in Njorway.

Another orthographic device is the *spellinggram*. This is an epigram which spells out one or more of its words.

L-o-v-e spells romance; m-a-r-r-i-a-g-e dispels it.

To l-i-v-e the wrong way is e-v-i-l.

Marriage is a gambol, spelled g-a-m-b-l-e.

The humor of spelling occasionally capitalizes on *capitals*. When James Gordon Bennett was guiding the destinies of the *New York Herald* he issued a strict edict that under no circumstances should the name *Herald* be printed except in capitals. One typesetter showed his unflinching obedience to the order when he set up a Christmas program announcement with the following item: "Hark the HERALD Angels Sing."

A woman dialed information on her telephone to find out a number. The operator said, "The number you want is Capital 2-7485." Hesitating for a moment, the woman asked, "How do you dial a capital 2?"

Spelling with or without capitals is not always a jesting matter. The Coca-Cola Company is said to spend \$100,000 a year in its efforts to retain its trade-mark by requesting journalists and writers of all kinds to spell it *Coke* and not *coke*.

Capitalization is briefly discussed in the chapters on Abbrevese and Novelty English where comic effects other than spelling are involved.

In *initial spelling* the letters of a word represent the initials of other words. Thus, H-U-M-O-R spells out

Helps Us Maintain Our Reason. W-I-T spells out *Wisdom In Tidbits*. And P-U-N spells out *Play Upon Names*.

Many a funny story is founded on initial spelling. One perennial tells about a long-winded Yale alumnus who was called upon to deliver a talk in honor of his alma mater. He took the letters Y-A-L-E and began to expatiate on them. Y stood for Youth, A stood for Ambition, and so on. After expounding an hour on the first two letters, he was about to begin on L. Thereupon a bored member of the audience turned to his neighbor and said, "I'm certainly glad he didn't graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

More playful than initialese is *name spelling*. It laughs at all kinds of names, from the simplest to the most unspellable jawbreakers. Oldtimers will recall the classic name-speller in American jokelore, the story of the cop and the dead horse on Kosciuszko Street.

A contemporary variant is told by Senator Bourke Hickenlooper of Iowa. When he was a kid he went to the town druggist one day and said, "I want five cents' worth of asafetida, and charge it to my father." "What's your father's name?" asked the druggist. "Hickenlooper," replied the boy. "Here, take the asafetida for nothing," cried the druggist. "I'll be damned if I'm going to spell both asafetida and Hickenlooper for a nickel."

A newspaper was checking the name of a Virginian. "L," asked the reporter, "as in Lincoln?" "No, suh," indignantly objected the Southern gentleman, "L as in Lee."

Another newspaper case covers football. "What's the new halfback's name?" asked the coach. "Szcuckowski," answered his assistant. "Good!" exclaimed the coach. "Put him on the first team. Now watch me get back at those reporters!"

After having been introduced to each other at a

party, two men struck up a conversation. "I have a hard time catching people's names when I'm introduced," said one. "So do I," said the other, "but I found a clever way to get around asking to have the name repeated. I just ask, 'Do you spell your name with an *e* or an *i*?' It usually works." His acquaintance nodded. "I know," he replied. "I heard about that trick before. It worked with me too until I met a girl who swept me off my feet. Now she won't even look at me." "How is that?" asked the other. "Well," explained the first man, "when I was first introduced to her I was struck so much by her beauty that I didn't catch her name. So I asked her whether she spelled it with an *e* or an *i*." "What was her name?" asked the other. His acquaintance said, "Hill."

Orthographese deals not only with name spelling but with *spelling names*, a popular specimen being the stenographic stereotype of recent origin. Since World War II the demand for trained clerical help has exceeded the supply and has led to the forced hiring of inefficient office workers. Out of this situation a new popular caricature was born—Miss Speller, the stenographer or secretary who cannot spell. Encountered nowadays in cartoons and stories as well as in offices throughout the land, she is the girl you pay to learn how to spell while she is looking for a husband.

Since Miss Speller's job is to take dictation, she finds herself in constant difficulties with her employer. One day she tells him, "Of course I can spell correctly. But I'm not a fanatic about it." Another day she answers him, "If I can't spell the words in the first place, how do you expect me to find them in the dictionary?" Still another day she asks him to stop using words that cause him to complain about her spelling.

Once, when Miss Speller first applied for a stenographer's job, her prospective boss asked her, "What did

you learn at school?" "I learned," she explained, "that spelling is essential to a stenographer." The boss chuckled. "Good. Now let me hear you spell *essential*," he said. Miss Speller hesitated. "There are three ways," she answered. "Which do you prefer?"

This office creature is nothing if not original. "How do you spell 'sense'?" she once asked her boss. "Which one?" he inquired. "Dollars and cents, or horse sense?" "Well," she explained, "like in 'I haven't seen him sense.'"

Miss Speller is perfection itself in making up excuses for not being letter perfect. Once her employer criticized her. "Look here," he cried, "you haven't the remotest idea of spelling. Do you know you've spelled *pneumatic* n-e-w-m-a-t-i-c?" "I'm sorry," she replied, "but the *k* on my machine isn't working."

Among the various sections of orthographic humor, *juvenile spelling* merits a few words. This is an overall term for the assorted blunders, tricks and wordplay of childhood. Spellbound children today have to contend with problems which never existed for their parents. They must learn to spell words like corn, crisp and cracker while finding them on commercial products printed Korn, Krisp and Kracker. Nevertheless, their cunning and logic are mostly new variations on old practices.

A first-grader cautioned his four-year-old brother: "If you want to be smart, don't learn to spell your first word. Once you learn to spell *cat*, you're trapped. From then on the words get bigger and harder."

Juvenile logic is illustrated in the observation of a youngster who told his mama: "It doesn't look right for a little thing like a kitten to have six letters, and for a big cat to have only three."

Juvenile cunning is just as original as juvenile logic and even more ingenious. The father of one lad asked

him, after he had been going to school for a month, what he had learned that day. "We learned about a mouse, daddy," he said. "Spell mouse," asked his father. The lad thought for a moment, and then replied, "You know, daddy. It wasn't really a mouse. It was a rat."

Altogether different was the case of little Albert who was better in elementary arithmetic than in spelling. He was at the blackboard having difficulty spelling a word when one of his classmates, trying to be helpful, whispered, "Just add *e*." Albert looked over his shoulder and, with lofty condescension, said, "I'm not adding, I'm spelling."

The counterpart of juvenile spelling is the *parental* and adult type. Spelling out words in the presence of pre-school-age children to keep them in ignorance of persons or things referred to in adult conversation occurs both inside and outside the family circle.

The stock story tells about two visitors who were cautiously discussing the child of the hostess while her mother was out of the room. "Not very p-r-e-t-t-y, is she?" remarked one to the other. "No," said the little girl defiantly, "but pretty s-m-a-r-t."

A television gagwriter was conversing with a sponsor when another writer approached and said he'd like to speak to him. "Go ahead," said the gagwriter. The other muttered, "Not in front of the client." "Well, then," said the first man, "spell it."

Another satiric case concerned a young lady who had been psychoanalyzed and had lost her inhibitions. "I can do anything now," she announced. "I can even say *damn* in front of my m-o-t-h-e-r."

Humorist Sam Levenson once ridiculed the practice of parental spelling. "It's no use spelling out things to your wife so the kids won't understand," he observed. "If you don't want them to hear what you're saying, pretend you're talking to them."

As old customs evolve and new ones come into being, new spelling situations and types flow from them. The rise of *telephone spelling*—sometimes called telephonet-ics though it is less phonetic than alphabetic—is due to the enormous growth of this communication system. Of the many specimens, the most familiar is the Ottiwell Wood gag with its double letters. Another concerns a man by the name of Tupper who, when asked to spell it, says: “T as in Tom, U as in united, double P as in double pneumonia . . .”

The standard pattern is to illustrate the letters of a name with words that reveal a person’s character, job, activities, or the like. Professor Brown, for example, is a zoologist, so he identifies the letters of his name with animals. “No, not Bryan, Brown,” he was once heard on the phone. “B as in bandicoot, R as in rorqual, O as in okapi, W as in wildebeest, and N as in narwhal.” By the same token a highbrow mathematician with the same name might use B for binomial, R for rhombohedron, O for ordinate, etc.

Less intellectual was the telephone spelling of a sailor who called up a girl. “Hello, honey,” he cried, “this is Gideon.” “Who did you say you are?” asked the feminine voice at the other end. “Gideon, honey, remember?” he repeated. “G for gin, I for ice, D for drink, E for excess, O for off duty, and N for necking. Get it, honey?” “Well,” returned the feminine voice, “not all of it, but come on over, anyway.”

Many a *Cockney speller* comes out of London. One fellow called an Ealing number and, when the operator couldn’t make out the exchange, spelled it for her: “E for ’erbert, A for what ’orses eat, L for where you are going, I for me, N for what lays the heggs, and G for Jesus.”

Before closing this chapter some mention should be made of *spelling tricks* for they set off in some measure

the endless variety of spelling slips. A man had painted his fence and put up a sign: WHET PAYNTE. A passerby told him the sign was misspelled. "I know it is," agreed the painter, "but if I spelled it right nobody would notice it."

More obvious was the verbal device used in the wedding invitation which read: "We request your presents . . ."

The most elementary of these tricks was the evasion of a schoolboy. The teacher asked him, "How do you spell Mississippi?" He replied, "Do you mean the river or the state?"

Poor spellers at college are more resourceful. One student was asked by his roommate who was writing home, "How do you spell *financially*?" He answered, "F-i-n-a-n-c-i-a-l-l-y, and there are two *r*'s and two *s*'s in embarrassed."

Another version has a student ask his roommate, "How do you spell financially embarrassed?" His friend, also allergic to spelling, replies, "B-r-o-k-e."

One final story. A suburban couple received 100 tulip bulbs late in the fall from a friend in Holland. The wife kept asking her husband to plant them, but he delayed until in desperation she did the job herself. Naturally, he was highly pleased, at least until the flowers came up in the early spring and he saw that his wife had planted them so that in glowing colors they spelled out: JOHN IS LAZY.

MISUSAGE

Many learned dissertations have been written on the differences between American and British English, but few on the differences between American and British humor. The most quoted quip on the subject is Bernard Shaw's paradox that England and America are two countries separated by the same language.

In recent years the swarm of American tourists over England has brought about an increase in the number of stories involving American English and the unexpected consequences when this foreign language is spoken there. One American schoolteacher was unable to find the restroom in a large London railway station. She approached a uniformed attendant and inquired, "Where will I find the ladies' restroom?" The polite guard made a sweeping gesture with his arm and said, "Madam, you are free to rest in any of these rooms."

When Marilyn Monroe, the American Venus, visited England, one London correspondent wrote that she looked like a million dollars. Fortunately, he did not write that she looked like a million pounds.

English as she is bruised by foreigners is an even more plentiful source of amusement to its listeners and embarrassment to its speakers. A French nurse was getting ready to weigh a baby. "Now," she said, "I'll put him on ze scales and pound him."

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Another foreigner who had not yet mastered the language of Webster was a Hungarian actress in Hollywood. Whenever her husband heard her make a mistake in English, she remarked, "he would go around my behind and tell people." No wonder she was embarrassed.

A semiclassic story of this kind involves a visitor from South America. At a dinner party in Texas he was telling about his country and himself, concluding, "And I have a sympathetic wife but, unfortunately, no children. My wife, she is unbearable." The others greeted this with puzzled glances, so he tried to explain: "My wife, she is inconceivable." Noticing from the bewildered guests that this didn't clarify the matter, he finally explained in triumph with a smile: "I mean, my wife, she is impregnable."

Not all foreign-English *slips* are introduced into the language by foreigners. Some are simply misinterpretations arising out of the confusion of one word with another. Leonard Lyons, the syndicated columnist who has contributed many a choice story to linguicomedie, tells about a supper party where an American actor was seated next to a charming Frenchwoman residing in Italy. The actor, who knows Italy well, asked in what part of the country she lived, and she said, "In ze Norz." "What beautiful lakes you have," he remarked. "How can you see zem?" she asked. "Zey are under ze table."

Foreigners often come to grief because idioms and slang expressions carry connotations contrary to the simple meaning of their words. A foreign student at an American college respectfully addressed the dean with, "I'm pleased to meet you, sir, I have heard that you are a wise guy."

Another foreigner familiar with English but not with its slang was told at a warm midsummer party that it was complimentary to tell a woman she looked cool. An op-

portunity soon presented itself, but instead of saying to his hostess, "How cool you look!", he told her, "You don't look so hot!"

How can we keep strangers from making such slips when our language is so slippery? Tell a girl that time stands still when you look into her eyes, and she'll adore you. But just try telling her that her face would stop a clock!

In shipping circles the story is told of the woman who wrote for a comfortable *birth* because she was susceptible to seasickness. The reply expressed the hope that she would not suffer from *mal de mère*.

Comic slips may be divided into two broad groups. The types with inherent qualities, like mixed metaphors and non sequiturs, never go out of fashion and are found on all levels of speech and writing. Other types make a temporary appeal because fashions in verbal misuse come and go like other fashions.

In past ages comic slips lasted longer than in recent times because illiteracy was the rule. The *bull*, for instance, survived three centuries, beginning from about 1620. The *boner* or *howler*, on the other hand, was a popular favorite for only half a century because it came into vogue during the latter half of the 1800's.

Because of its centuries-long run in the history of humorous English the bull deserves some comment here. It is always an absurd inconsistency made by a speaker or writer who is unaware of its contradiction in terms.

Youth would be more interesting if it came later in life.

The sweetest memories in life are recollections of things forgotten.

Mother to screaming infant: "Now will you shut your mouth and eat!"

Many a specimen of such blunders is a bull in more ways than one, like the description of a bull as a male

cow that kicks best with its horns. Or the story of a health committee of a town that was discussing the type of milk which should be supplied to the schoolchildren. The chairman of the group said: "What this town needs is a supply of clean, fresh milk, and we should take the bull by the horns and demand it."

The bull that uses the bull as an example is more often not a blunder but wit. Sir John Pentland Mahaffy, the famous Irish classical scholar, was once asked what the difference is between Irish and English bulls. "The Irish bull is pregnant," he explained, "whereas the English bull is sterile."

The most fertile bull-maker of all was Sir Boyle Roche, a member of the old Parliament in Dublin. It is impossible to know how many bulls were sired by him, but certainly hundreds were sired on him. As a Hibernian he was the perfect source for allonymous blunders of this type because the English affixed the epithet Irish to every bull but the taurine species. Some of the better-known sayings attributed to the Roche are:

My country is overrun by absentee landlords.

The cup of Ireland's troubles is overflowing, but 'tis not full yet.

Single misfortunes never come alone, and the worst of all misfortunes is generally followed by a greater.

Although the comic bull is no longer in fashion, it will never become extinct. At a motion picture studio recently a deathbed scene was being enacted, but the film producer was not satisfied with the hero's acting. "Come on!" he roared. "Put more life into your dying."

Another in the animal kingdom of humorous English is the *malaprop animal*. This is an imaginary pun creature often confused with a real beast of similar sound. Although malaprop animals comprise distinct species they

all have one characteristic in common: they are boners or howlers created by youngsters in classrooms.

Some of these creatures have been described as follows: A polygon is a dead parrot; a myth is female moth; an octagon is a sea animal having eight arms; a buttress is a female goat; a brunette is a young bear; and a leper is a wild animal with spots.

These malaprop animals of childhood make up only a small quantity compared with adult *malapropisms*. English literature abounds in malaprop characters who have enriched the comedy of the language they ruin. Among these are Shakespeare's Dogberry, Fielding's Mrs. Slipslop, Dickens's Sam Weller, Sr., Smollett's Winifred Jenkins, and Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop herself. Shakespeare erred in making his chief malaprop character a man since the type is peculiarly a feminine one, but he cancelled out part of his error by the later creation of a female counterpart, Dame Quickly.

American literature added to this galaxy of blundering word-twisters. The most celebrated among them was an old lady named Mrs. Partington. Her assault and battery on the English language was recorded by the humorist Benjamin P. Shillaber. Some of her verbal mayhem became proverbial sayings in the nineteenth century though they carry a somewhat musty flavor today:

He speaks French like a Parishioner.

Here's Dr. Johnson's dictionary. Study it contentively and you will gain a great deal of inflammation.

If there is any place where I like to ransack business more than another, it is a bank.

Another celebrated American malaprop was Mrs. Spriggins. She was the brainless brain-child of the humorist John Kendrick Bangs. Her mangling of the language was a frequent feature of the old *Life*, the comic weekly, and was widely quoted in the press. When the

newspapers reported that the Presidential candidate, Grover Cleveland, was in the van, she couldn't understand why there wasn't room for him in the smoking car. On reading that an old man of her acquaintance had died intestate, she said she always knew he would ruin his innards.

In more recent years fiction has given way to fact. The leading malaprop-makers were not the semiliterate creatures of literature but of life. The best or worst of such word-assassins were Hollywood directors and producers like Samuel Goldwyn and Mike Curtiz.

Everyone praises a good mixer but not when he mixes his metaphors, unless of course they have been committed by Shakespeare or some other literary titan. Hamlet mixed metaphors in his *To be or not to be* soliloquy when he wondered whether "to take arms against a sea of troubles" instead of oars against a sea of troubles or arms against a siege of troubles.

Such flights of speech are most often mixed by orators and legislators who are themselves mixed-up figures of speech. A patriotic M.P., during a heated discussion in the House of Commons, shouted: "The British lion, whether it is roaming in the sands of the Near East or climbing the forests of Africa, will not draw in its horns or retire into its shell."

His American counterpart, an Illinois Senator, matched this mixture: "And what do we do? We pursue the shadow, the bubble bursts, and leaves but sackcloth and ashes in our empty hands."

Multiple specimens are seldom as pointed as those employing only two inconsistent figures in a single expression.

He may be poor and shabby, but beneath those ragged trousers beats a heart of gold.

They are always biting the hand that lays the golden egg.

As I look over the audience I see many faces I should like to shake hands with.

For many years, under the caption *Block That Metaphor!*, the *New Yorker* magazine has been using these figurative mistreatments of English as fillers to amuse its readers.

Mrs. Malaprop and the nameless creature who misuses *idioms* are birds of a feather. This is the idiomatic idiot, usually a woman, who subtracts insult from injury, who describes things as black as the Jack of Spades, and casually mentions the status quo anti. It is she who burns her fingers at both ends, steals someone's thunder and lightning, and whose deep feelings come from the top of her heart.

This unpredictable creature loves to compound familiar expressions. She violates the language from head to Achilles heel by always putting the carte blanche before the horse, and by innocently referring to such things as a bed and board of roses. Her mishandling of names features the same unpredictable quality. She will compare someone with Caesar who crossed the Rubicon between Scylla and Charybdis, or with Caesar's wife who was all things to all men, and in the next breath, without warning, go from Daniel to Beersheba.

The *non sequitur* has already been noticed under *ambiguity*. It achieves its effect by pulling the rug out from under cause and effect, as when Dickens makes Nicholas Nickleby say: "The name began with B and ended with G. Perhaps it was Waters."

A follow-up of a different kind may be taken from Robert Benchley, American humorist: "Is life made too easy for the youth of today? Are we raising a generation of pampered dawdlers? What is that on your necktie?"

More often than not, the nonsense of non sequence is an unintentional misuse of language. A schoolboy bonered: "The Emperor Nero was playing a fiddle, so they burned Rome."

Similar misrelations between the follow-up and the follow-through are found in many varieties of English—classified ads, epitaphs, signs, etc. The following are from the casebook of a social worker:

Couple breaking up; friend helping.

These people are highly cultured and something should be done about their condition.

The diversity of comic non sequiturs includes simple *juxtaposers* as well as compound *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* situations. A whiskey-soaked panhandler beckoned a passerby: "Mister, can you give me two bits to buy a sandwich? I'm so thirsty, I don't know where I'll find a place to sleep tonight."

This is a far cry from the logic of the man who had read so much about the evil effects of smoking that he decided to give up reading.

With the phenomenal growth of the press in recent generations, the *typographical error* has become a leading source of amusing slips. I have discussed this brand of slipshod comedy in some detail in my *Humor of Humor*, but a few additional comments may be made here.

In the *clipped misprint* it is the accidental omission of a letter that creates the comic result. There are three categories of cutting which mark such errors.

Forecutting: "The quota program will reduce operations of certain slaughterers who have recently increased their laughter greatly."

Intercutting: "Among the famous North Carolina resorts there are more golf curses per square mile than anywhere else in the world."

Backcutting: "If we could send young singers abroad to stud and perform, they would do more in good will for our country than a million dollars in aid."

Not all amusing misprints amuse. A candidate in a municipal election once ran a political advertisement with the slogan: "You need a friend in the City Council." A dropped *r* in one word turned the slogan into, "You need a fiend in the City Council." This typographical error resulted in a \$100,000 suit for negligence, the candidate charging that the error had exposed him to contempt and scorn.

If Freud is to be believed, and if misprints come under his category of slips, then typesetters must be of contempt and scorn all compact. Was the compositor who set the following item a frustrated educator, or was it the proofreader who overlooked the error?

"The document was compiled by six faulty members of the School of Education."

The countertype of the clipped misprint is the *extended misprint*. Here it is the accidental addition of a letter that makes a statement amusing. As with cutting, there are three categories of adding.

Addition at the beginning: "They will liven up the gymnasium with a series of dances and stumbling exhibitions."

Addition in the middle: "He was the rankling Republican member of the finance committee."

Addition at the end: "She was attractively attired in taffeta gown and mink stolen."

Splitting is another of the many techniques that underlie typographical errors, with the tongue-twisting term *splitslip* standing for the misprint in which a word is split in two.

A word like *atone* if improperly printed may appear as *a tone* or *at one* with startling consequences. A familiar splitslip is the typo that read: The bride wore a white sat in slip.

Then there was the man who had a predilection for the word *gotten*. One day he sent his wife the following telegram: HAVE GOTTEN TICKETS FOR THE THEATER. When she received the wire, it read: HAVE GOT TEN TICKETS FOR THE THEATER. So that evening when she met her husband in the theater lobby, she was accompanied by eight eager friends.

Splitslips are not confined to misprints but cover all blunders involving word division, like the misinterpretation of a schoolboy whose teacher evidently spoke too slowly. "Name three hardships Columbus had on his journey of exploration," she asked. "The Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria," he replied.

Today we laugh at amusing misprints, but our forefathers back in the seventeenth century laughed at its counterpart, the *misreading*. It played a long engagement in linguicomedie and sheds light on the development of our language.

Before the establishment of democratic government there was no such thing as widespread education and literacy. It was the practice for literate persons to read to the illiterate. As the reader was usually none too literate himself, he would read incorrectly, turning occasional mistakes into unintentional humor. And since the Bible was the book most commonly read from, most of these slips stem from it. Here are a couple of quaint specimens culled from the literature of the period:

One was reading in the Old Testament that "Moses made an ointment for the shins of the people" instead of "Moses made an atonement for the sins of the people."

Another read, "the sheep eat up one of the mountains" for "the sheep eat upon the mountains."

In the history of comic misuseage the *air break*, or the fluff, as it is often called, is likely to be given an important place. It stands for any amusing slip broadcast over radio or television, and occurs only in spontaneous programs and untranscribed commercials. In filmed matter it is automatically cut out when caught. These air breaks are not specific slips of tongue but embrace all kinds of mispronunciations and misconstructions.

The most prevalent of such slips is the *spoonerism*. One newscaster opened with: "We bring you five minutes of the latest news compiled by the wild-word facilities of the United Press." Another announcer, promoting a drug store's prescription department, closed with: "This is typical of the scare and kill shown by the Main Street Drug Store."

Also widespread among fluff-makers is *tangletalk*. An announcer wound up his commercial pitch: "If you're not satisfied with this dinner set, return it to us. You have absolutely everything to lose and nothing to gain."

Occasionally tangletalk and spoonerism gang up together. An excited fluff-maker led off: "Good ladies, evening and gentlemen of the audio radiance." Another signed off a political speech in Canada: "You have been listening to the Honorable Minister of Wealth and Hellfire."

These lipslips play havoc with words and are as varied as they are unexpected. A former Governor of Connecticut got off to an unhappy start over a national broadcast: "I am happy to speak over this nation-wide hiccup." Equally unhappy was the weather reporter who promised "rain and slow followed by sneet."

Proper names too are at the mercy of fluffers. No

one is immune, neither Presidents like "Hoobert Heever" nor Popes like "His Holiness, Pipe Poess." An announcer once introduced the Governor of the Virgin Islands as "the Virgin of Governor's Island."

Commercials too permit unwitting cracks in the form of air breaks. One commercial referred to a toothpaste as "an excellent mouse wash." Another pushed the virtues of a shortening by claiming that "it needs no refrigeration. It stays for weeks and reeks right there on your pantry shelf."

PUNCTUATION

Every department of English has a comic history of its own, and this applies to grammar as well as schools. In the comic history of punctuation honorable mention must be made of Timothy Dexter, an early American zany who wrote a book without any punctuation marks. But at the end of it he massed a large number of them and invited his readers to "pepper the dish" to suit themselves.

Then there was the case of the old-time printer who set down his own quaint rule for punctuation. "I set type as long as I can hold my breath," he explained, "and then I put in a comma. When I yawn I put in a semicolon. And when I want a chew of tobacco I make a paragraph."

More typical of the present is the story of the employer who said to his newly hired stenographer, "I hope, Miss Smith, that you thoroughly understand the importance of punctuation." "Oh, yes indeed," she replied, "I always come to work on time."

Apart from anecdotal lore there are various types of punctuative comedy. One is *comparative punctuation* in which two marks are played against each other—a sort of mark twain wit.

There comes a period in every man's life, but she's just a semicolon in his.

Another species of punctuative comparison is a matter of analogy.

He sprang up suddenly like an exclamation mark.

She curled up with a book like a question mark.

In *omissive punctuation* the failure to include a mark carries an amusing effect. A venerable classic was the sign in a boarding house: "Please Clean Tub After Bathing Landlady."

An American tourist was enraptured with a very expensive rug she found in Paris and cabled for her husband's consent in buying it. He cabled back, "No price too high." When she returned home with the rug, her husband was furious. "But you cabled me to buy it," she remonstrated, producing the message. When her husband looked at the cable, he was shocked. "They left out the period after 'No'," he cried. "I cabled 'No. Price too high.'"

A comic perennial is *twisted punctuation*. Through the substitution and rearrangement of stops, a statement may be given a different or even opposite meaning.

Woman! Without her, man would be uncivilized.

Woman, without her man, would be uncivilized.

While Richard Brinsley Sheridan was a member of the British Parliament, he was once called upon to apologize to a fellow member. He rose and said without pausing between the words, "Mr. Speaker I said the honorable member was a liar it is true and I am sorry for it." He then added that the honorable member could place the punctuation marks where he pleased.

The substitution of speech sounds for punctuation marks is called *phonetic punctuation*. The period, comma, colon, question mark, etc., are each represented

by a different explosive stop like p, t, k, or by a hissing continuant like s, sh, ch. The chief exponent of phonetic punctuation, if not the originator, is Victor Borge, the musical comedian, who has recorded this brand of comedy on a disc sold in enormous quantities. To have heard and seen Borge dramatize phonetic punctuation on the stage or over television, as millions have, is to have enjoyed a memorable experience.

Another kind of oral punctuation is illustrated in the *New Yorker* cartoon of a pastor in his study speaking into a dictaphone: "We, comma, who are gathered here in prayer, comma, thank Thee for Thy past and continued kindnesses, semi-colon, we. . . ."

A couple of punctuation marks were talking. "Can you stretch a point?" asked one. "Certainly," said the period. And that's how the comma was born.

The *punctuative definition* is another species in the comedy of stops. It is usually a clever definition of one mark of punctuation in terms of another.

comma. A period with a tail.

period. A comma that has curled up and gone to sleep.

The punctuative definition is also applied to any explanation of a word where the wit derives from the use or even the subject of punctuation.

Holland. A low-lying country but not a low, lying country.

college. An institution where you learn how to use punctuation marks, but not what to put between them.

Whatever the true origin of the *comma*, modern English uses fewer commas than 18th- or 19th-century prose. This is due to its simpler sentence structure. However, it produces many more specimens of comma comedy.

You are not what you think you are but what you think, you are.

If you want to get fat, don't eat fast; if you want to get thin, don't eat, fast.

Curiously enough, the comic use of commas seems to have started in the Garden of Eden when Adam said, "This is Christmas, Eve." To which Eve replied, "I don't give, Adam."

A current conversation piece shows that such dialogue hasn't changed much since Genesis. "Did your husband die happily?" "Yes, he died, happily." This is a switch from the drama critic who, instead of writing that "the play ended happily" wrote: "The play ended, happily."

Much of the humor of commas derives from their omission, as in the case of the man who told an acquaintance, "I have two and a half dozen children." When the other gasped, he explained, "Yes, two and a half dozen. Two, and a half dozen which is six, make eight. I have eight children."

The similarity in spelling between comma and coma is a commonplace of confusion. One schoolboy defined a comma as something that a medium falls into. Another and brighter boy explained, "A coma interrupts the thought of a person, but a comma interrupts the thought of a sentence."

Among the several types of comic dashes, one is the epigrammatic dash, another the interruptive dash, and a third the euphemistic dash. In addition to these there is the dash which serves as a catchall for miscellaneous humor. A pastor tried to solve the problem of absentee churchgoers by putting up a sign in front of his church: THIS IS A CH--CH. WHAT IS MISSING?

A dash of another kind tells about the college student who asked another how to punctuate the sentence: "The

gorgeous redhead smiling at me as I passed her was obviously on the make." "That's easy," was the reply. "You put a comma after *redhead*, another comma after *her*, and a period after *make*." "That may be correct, but it isn't right," answered the other. "You should have made a dash after *the gorgeous redhead*."

Like other marks of punctuation, the dash sometimes runs into verse. The following quatrain shows how dashes can even turn icy pavements into heated feelings.

That man our blessings oft receives
Who spreads his walk with ashes;
The language fit for those who don't
Is best expressed by — — —.

The *euphemistic dash*, like the dash in h--l, was formerly more favored than at present. A lad looked up from the book he was reading and asked his mother what two *d*'s stand for. She explained that they mean Doctor of Divinity. "But that doesn't seem to fit the meaning, Mom," he said. "Then read it aloud to me," she asked. The lad read: "The witness testified that she heard the defendant say, 'I'll make you suffer for this. I'll be Doctor of Divinity if I don't!'"

The *interruptive dash* indicates a break in the speech of one person by another. This sign is so called because it is the *sine qua non* of printed interruption comedy.

"Er-er, Dad," stammered the youth, "I'm in love with a girl, and—" "Well," interrupted his indifferent parent, "you couldn't have made a better choice."

A woman reading a newspaper said to her husband, "Here's a scientist trying to prove that worms think." Her husband answered, "I think—" "Yes, dear," cut in his wife, "but you may be an exceptional case."

Then there was the lecturer who, during an interminable speech, finally wound up, "I want housing reform,

I want educational reform, I want traffic reform, I want—" Just then a snide voice in the audience interrupted, "Chloroform."

The interruptive dash is also found in classroom comedy where it may punctuate the remarks of teacher or pupil. A teacher, conducting a discussion of current events, asked, "Sue, what is the UN?" Sue began, "The UN are—" The teacher interrupted her with, "Don't say *are*, say *is*." "Okay," agreed Sue with a shrug. "The UN isbitrates disagreements between nations."

The *epigrammatic dash* is to written or printed wit what the comic pause is to spoken wit, a break to sharpen the surprise effect of the twist that follows.

A diamond is the hardest stone—to get.

Money cannot buy love, or the law, or the respect of people—that is, counterfeit money.

Certain types of epigrams, like the exceptionism and the specialism, often make use of the epigrammatic dash. In the *twisted proverb* also it is put before unexpected turns.

Sweet are the uses of adversity—someone else's adversity.

Truth lies—at the bottom of a well.

Ignorance of the law excuses no man—from practicing it.

No mark is immune from punctuative comedy. The *period*, for example, furnishes this witticism:

In the old days a man used to marry a woman for a dot; now he marries her for a period.

The *decimal point* is likewise serviceable.

The new army rifle is said to weigh 8.69 pounds. After it has been carried about three hours, the period drops out.

The *question mark* is sometimes subjected to wit by being the subject of it.

The interrogation point is a pointed question that precedes a rounded question mark.

A barber's remarks are always to the point—the interrogation point.

As for the *hyphen*, authorities differ on whether it connects parts of a word or separates them. Since humor can be hyphenated in English but wit cannot, epigrams sometimes hit the mark without resorting to its use.

It's all right to break your word if you use a hyphen.

The writer who gets paid by the word seldom uses hyphens.

You shouldn't hyphenate the word *headache* unless it's a splitting one.

The *shifted hyphen* is found only in humorous English and may carry more truth than travesty. One cynic remarked that the resemblance between politics and graft is purely coin-cidental.

The absence of a phonetic hyphen in speech leads to ambiguity. One man says to another, "I saw a man-eating shark at the aquarium." The other counters, "That's nothing. I saw a man eating herring in a restaurant."

Schoolboy howlers also provide humorous hyphenese. One lad bonered, "Soda-water is written as two separate words joined together by a syphon."

Then there was the teacher who, instructing her young pupils in the use of the hyphen, asked them to give her an example of its use. One little girl submitted the word

bird-cage. "That's right," encouraged the teacher. "Now, tell us why we put a hyphen in bird-cage." "It's for the bird to sit on," explained the child.

Typographical errors play havoc with this mark, especially in the division of a word at the end of a printed line. An exporter is automatically turned into an exporter, and many a notable person suddenly becomes notable.

Like the hyphen, the *apostrophe* is a purely visual sign of punctuation. It does not stand for pauses in speech or changes of voice as most other punctuation marks do. In most cases it represents the omission of one or more letters from a word, and therein hangs many a jest.

The apostrophe in a word like *what's* may represent either *what is* or *what does* in informal talk. One man says to another, "I haven't seen Joe's girlfriend yet. What's she like?" The other answers, "Expensive clothes, night clubs and fancy cars."

Sometimes the apostrophe involves speech where one of its uses is mistaken for another. But more often epigrams are contrived out of the interplay between the possessive and the contractive apostrophes.

Character is a man's worth; success is what a man's worth.

The same device, substituting one use of the apostrophe for another, has been handled nimbly by Richard Armour, American humorist and comic versifier: "In the spring a young man's fancy, but a young woman's fancier."

The *apostrophic pun* substitutes for grammatical contraction a word having the same pronunciation, or vice versa, like *e'er* for *heir*, or *I'll* for *aisle*.

A handsome man turned up at a tennis tournament in the middle of a set and sat down on a bench. "Whose

game?" he asked the pretty little blonde next to him. She looked up at him hopefully and smiled. "I am," she said.

Bernard Shaw battled incessantly against the apostrophe and had his publishers omit it from his writings. The practice sometimes led to unintentional humor in print, especially when I'll became Ill, he'll became hell, and she'd shed while we'd wed.

Asterisks are the little stars which old-time authors used to sprinkle through their novels at places where the reader was expected to use his own imagination. They warned the reader to proceed at his own risk because they suggested something risqué. An old verse ran:

An author owned some asterisks
And kept them in his den
Where he wrote tales that had large sales
Of erring maids and men.
And always, when he reached the point
Where carping censors lurk,
He called upon the asterisks
To do his dirty work.

A recent news item reported a cockney as testifying in a London court: "The shock caused my wife to go off in asterisks!"

Asterisks are not used much in printing nowadays, having given way to spaced dots, except in reference books where they call attention to footnotes.

A cynical grammarian recently suggested that we likewise abolish the *exclamation mark* on the grounds that people aren't surprised at anything any more.

I have defined the exclamation point in my *Comic Dictionary* as an upright mark preceded by a downright statement. Also as a period that has blown its top. Such definitions comprise only one of the angles which this mark supplies to the humor of punctuation.

It sometimes reveals a woman's feelings even more than her words. When a man tries to embrace a girl, it means one thing if she cries, "Don't! Stop!", and another if she cries, "Don't stop!" Then again, it may indicate no difference in her feelings but merely in her tactics.

As a non-punctuative sign the exclamation mark serves to suggest words unexpressed.

Breathes there a man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said,
As he stubbed his toe against the bed,
! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! !

This line of signs which ends the verse is equally suitable to end this chapter for I am beginning to feel like the editor who said that too many exclamation marks put him in a semi-coma.

GRAMMAR

Important grammatical relations like gender have already been discussed in previous chapters. Before proceeding further, other fundamental features of grammar like number and tense must be described because they cast light on some of the chapters that follow.

Grammar, "the science which learns us how to speak correct," is often ridiculed in quips. One familiar saying goes, "I never made a mistake in grammar but once in my life, and as soon as I done it I seen it."

Not unlike this was the remark of a small boy who was overheard bragging to a schoolfriend: "I got an A in grammar—best I ever done."

Other sayings satirize grammar without resorting to self-ridicule. A twisted proverb runs: Money talks, but nobody notices what grammar it uses. This recalls Victor Hugo's epigram that everything bows to success, even grammar.

Mark Twain was no grammarian but he had a number of things to say on the subject. He once wrote: "Ignorant people feel it's the noise which fighting cats make that is so aggravating but it ain't so—it's the sickening grammar they use." And again: "I've never heard a blue jay use bad grammar, but very seldom; and when they do they are as ashamed as humans."

Although the teaching of grammar seldom has recourse

to puns, many are played on the word itself. One pun-joke tells of a Sunday visitor who asks a child, "Are your father and mother in?" The youngster says, "They was in but they is out." "What do you mean—they was in, they is out?" cries the shocked visitor. "Where's your grammar?" "She's gone upstairs," replies the child, "for a laydown."

Another story relates how a boss calls in his office manager and thrusts a letter under his nose. "Look at that!" he exclaims. "I thought I told you to hire a new stenographer on the basis of her grammar." The office manager looked startled. "Grammar?" he repeated in surprise. "I thought you said glamour."

The word itself is a limited playground, but as a branch of linguistic comedy grammar is a boundless world, most of it covering the wit and blunders of schoolchildren. Though the non-scholastic world of comic grammar is less fertile, it makes up in quality what it lacks in quantity.

Charles Dickens was once persuaded by some spiritualists to attend one of their seances. When asked to summon a departed spirit, he recalled a celebrated grammarian who had died when Dickens was a youth. "Summon Lindley Murray," Dickens suggested. Soon he was told that the spirit was in the room. "Are you Lindley Murray?" he asked. "I are," came the ghostly reply. That settled it for Dickens. He never again experimented with spiritualism.

Number comedy bears no relation to the comedy of *grammatical number* which consists of the differences of word forms representing one or more persons or things. A classic story dealing with grammatical number tells about a famous newspaper editor who always insisted that *news* was plural. One day, impatiently awaiting information of importance, he wired a correspondent,

"Are there any news?" The reporter wired back, "Not a new."

This was eventually turned into a well-known newspaper caption. The summary of national and international events making up a column on page one of the *Wall Street Journal* carries the unchanging head: "What's News."

Grammatical number normally applies to words having plural forms only, like scissors, pliers, physics. Artemus Ward, a devotee of such wordplay, once said about himself: "I have no politics—nary a one." And again, "Did you ever have the measles, and if so, how many?" Eugene Field was similarly word-minded. He wrote about a man who was so mean, he wouldn't let his little boy have more than one measle at a time.

The *pluralism* reverses this trick by giving a word in the singular an amusing form in the plural. Boners and comic definitions are responsible for many such singular plurals. The plural of ox is oxygen, the plural of whim is women, the plural of spouse is spice, the plural of baby is twins.

Epigrammatical number is nothing more or less than grammatical number in epigram form. It covers sayings which counterpoint the singular and plural forms of a word instead of substituting one form for another as in idiomatic number.

There's a vast difference between a girl's virtue and her virtues.

The man with vision always gets ahead of the man with visions.

What a lot of difference marriage makes, and what a lot of differences!

The trick in these epigrams is to choose words whose forms differ not only in number but in meaning as well. The verbal balance generally hangs on the last word.

In show business many performers live by their wits, but few by their wit.

The love of a humanitarian for the species is greater than his love for the specie.

Epigrammatical number always manages to wrap up a bit of wisdom or satire in witty wordplay.

G. K. Chesterton: The world will never starve for want of wonders, but for want of wonder.

Nietzsche: There is not enough religion in the world to destroy the religions of the world.

Arthur Balfour, the British prime minister, once got off an epigram of this type after the young and brash Winston Churchill unexpectedly opposed an important measure supported by his party. "I thought Churchill was a young man of promise," he said, "but it appears that he is a young man of promises."

Unlike grammatical number which is chiefly a matter of nouns, *mood* is a matter of verbs. It stands for the form of a verb that shows whether the action or state expressed is thought of as a fact, a desire, a command, etc. When a wife, for instance, looks moody, it's generally the imperative mood.

An exam in English once required the students to give examples of (1) the indicative, (2) the subjunctive, (3) the potential, and (4) the exclamatory moods. One student gave the correct answers as follows:

(1) I am trying to pass this English exam. (2) If I answer twenty questions, I shall pass. (3) If I answer twelve questions, I may pass. (4) God help me!

Then there was the grammar school teacher who had carefully explained to her class the different moods of verbs. "Now here's another example," she continued. "Take the cow to the pasture! What mood?" One of

the bright lads of the class raised his hand. "The cow," he answered.

Tense is the form of a verb to show the time or manner of its action or condition, like the present, past and future tenses.

Each of the tenses has been juggled in all sorts of amusing ways. O. O. McIntyre, the American journalist, once asked his readers if any of them knew, without looking it up, the present tense of the verb of which *wrought* is the past tense. Robert Benchley wrote that he had tried to figure it out but gave up after people found him muttering to himself in public places.

Even more than the present, the past tense serves humorous English. The past of *see* is *saw*, but it may also be *sawed*. Two magicians were boasting about their beautiful assistant, and one said, "I sawed her first."

The girl herself probably preferred the inflectional change from "she was indeed a sight to behold" to "she was indeed a sight to be held."

The past participle of *drink* is *drunk*—sometimes in more ways than one.

The comedy of grammar and the grammar of comedy profit by the future tense as well. Sample: The future tense of courting is caught. This tense often ridicules the use of the auxiliary forms *shall* and *will*, as in the familiar rule in reverse: "I will drown and nobody shall save me."

Less ambiguous is the response of a man who was asked if he had any trouble with *shall* and *will*. "Oh no," he answered. "My wife says 'You shall' and I say 'I will'."

Neither in serious nor humorous English are all tenses sharply defined. What tense, for example, is involved in the saying that you can always tell by looking at a girl what kind of a past she is going to have?

Or which one is covered by the tense situation in

which a woman had her face slapped by a fortuneteller whom she had consulted? "What's that for?" cried the client. "That," explained the crystal gazer, "is for kissing my husband next Saturday night."

Such *mixed tenses* usually follow a standard pattern in which two or more tenses of the same verb—usually the verb to be—are mingled cleverly or combined inconsistently. One mixed tense suggests rapid speed or sudden change. A motorist doing ninety observed, "That's a very pretty town we're coming to, wasn't it?" A catty woman resorted to the same grammatical device when she remarked to her friend, "You're only young once, darling—weren't you?"

Then there was the dialogue between an executive's wife and his secretary. "I'm Mr. Brown's wife," said a brunette, introducing herself to a beautiful blonde at a party. "I'm his secretary," said the other. "Oh," smiled the brunette arching her eyebrows, "Were you?"

Juggled tenses make effective satiric weapons. A movie star may be described as a woman who has been, is, and going to be married. Such a Hollywood creature once told her husband on their honeymoon, "Our marriage is wonderful, wasn't it?"

Mistiming and offbeat chronological situations also mingle together the tenses of verbs. One commuter, trapped in a washout, wired his boss: "Will not be at the office today. Am not home yesterday yet."

Even more mixed-up was the patient wife who could no longer stand the tardy homecomings of her playboy husband. "I've had enough of it," she upbraided him. "The night before last you came home yesterday. Last night you came home today. Now if tonight you come home tomorrow, I'm leaving you."

In grammar, *voice* stands for one of the forms of a verb showing the relation between the subject and predi-

cate. In humor, it is usually the interplay between the active and passive forms of the verb. Many an old proverb from many an old land is built upon such balance.

Things don't turn up, they must be turned up.

Better anticipate than be anticipated.

In epigrams, the voice of verbs is balanced satirically as well as grammatically.

Man learns in two ways: by doing and being done.

The stock market is a place where some men operate, but more men are operated on.

Quotation literature too supplies us with specimens of this kind.

Nicolas Chamfort, the French wit, wrote: "Fame is the advantage of being known to those who do not know us."

William Ralph Inge, the Anglican prelate, observed: "The whole of nature is a conjunction of the verb to eat, in the active and passive voice."

This led Logan Pearsall Smith to say: "I have been a success: for sixty years I have eaten, and have avoided being eaten."

Less acute but more cute are the remarks made in the classroom about grammatical voice. One schoolboy bonered that the active voice shows action, and the passive voice shows passion. Another schoolboy matched this erudition when asked to give the passive form of "John shot my dog." He replied, "My dog shot John."

Grammatical conversion, the change of form or function from one part of speech to another, turns an adverb into an adjective, an adjective into a verb, or a verb into a noun. This dual verbal role is most productive in the play of grammatical comedy.

The best thing for biting fingernails is sharp teeth.

She wanted to marry a sailor and rear admirals.

He tried to pick up a pretty girl and afterwards explained, "I asked to see her home, and she said she'd send me a picture of it."

The conversion pun is often a punnigram which adroitly handles two different parts of speech of the same word.

You can always see a woman's dress without seeing her dress.

A woman's declining years are often before thirty because she seldom declines afterwards.

The clinging gown she wore really clang.

Punch once plucked a want ad from a newspaper: "Capable housekeeper required, able to run home . . ." Punned Punch, "But not too often."

A witticism toying with the word *convertible* is pun-wit of another sort, like the man who was asked whether his girlfriend was a blonde or brunette or whether she had a convertible top.

A non-punning use of the same word climaxes the story about a man who was buying a typewriter for his son graduating from high school. "It's to be a surprise, I suppose," remarked the clerk. "I'll say it is," agreed the father. "He's expecting a convertible coupe."

This may be described as a *convertible story* on account of its subject but the genuine type always depends on grammatical conversion. The master of the house rang for the maid who was in the act of cleaning pots and pans. Before she could tidy herself, her employer entered the kitchen to see what was delaying her. Looking at her dirty hands and face, he said, "Well, Jane, you're pretty dirty, aren't you?" Jane smiled coyly. "Yes, sir," she replied, "but I'm prettier clean."

A movie star on the decline was listening to an ambitious younger actress. "It irks me to think," the other was saying, "that I get only \$100,000 a picture." The older woman raised her eyebrows and observed, "Nice irk if you can get it."

The convertible story is related to a former stereotype of comedy fashionable in minstrel shows, burlesque and vaudeville, and still occasionally served up by comedians over the air. This is the *conversion gag*, a dialogue in which one part of speech is misinterpreted for another.

"Do you like bathing beauties?" "I don't know. I never bathed any."

"Do you believe in enduring love?" "Yes, if I don't have to endure it too long."

Of less frequency than grammatical conversion are the changes in adjectives and adverbs to show *degrees of comparison*. The three degrees are positive, comparative, superlative, as: witty, wittier, wittiest; humorous, more humorous, most humorous.

Comic changes of degree are not restricted to the standard *-er* and *-est* additions or the *more* and *most* forms. Thus, instead of hot, hotter, hottest, we may substitute hot, damn hot, hell. And instead of delicious, more delicious, most delicious, we may write delicious, more delicious, m-m-m.

Similarly, the degrees of comparison ill, worse, worst become ill, worse, dead. Or, to stress the medical treatment instead of the patient's condition: ill, pill, bill.

Unlike their grammatical counterparts, comic degrees of comparison cover not only adjectives and adverbs but also other parts of speech like verbs. A racetrack comparison runs: bet, better, best don't.

The most famous of all such comparisons are the de-

grees for getting on in the world: get on, get honor, get honest.

Centuries ago a folk saying rose out of this form of English. "Man, woman, and devil," it proverbied, "are the three degrees of comparison."

The *comparative exception* is a type of comic saying in which something unique or exclusive is set against the comparative degree of an adjective or adverb. The synthetic *-er* form of comparison is used in many specimens:

There's only one thing harder than a diamond, and that's making the payments on it.

The only thing better than marrying a millionaire is divorcing one.

The only crime greater than writing a bad poem is writing a bad check.

The analytic *more than* form of the comparison also sparks many epigrams.

The only things more amusing than some of our statues are some of our statutes.

The only thing that hurts more than paying an income tax is not having to pay one.

There's only one person more uncomfortable than the man whose wife asks him for money every day, and that's the man who asks his wife for money every day.

Another run of comparative exceptions exploits the phrase *worse than* to show that no matter how bad anything is, there's always something worse.

There's only one thing worse than a husband who never comes home, and that's a husband who hangs around the house all the time.

There's only one thing worse than a person who gossips, and that's a person who doesn't know any.

The only thing worse than being married to a woman without a sense of humor is being married to a woman with one.

One of the most curious of all grammatical elements is the *interjection* because it is non-grammatical, or at least has no grammatical connection. It is an exclamatory word or phrase spoken suddenly in surprise or with strong feeling. In Mae West's first film there was a scene where a man takes one look at her dazzling jewels and cries out, "My goodness! Those are beautiful diamonds." "Goodness had nothing to do with it," replies amatory Mae. The actress thought so highly of this line that she used it as the title of her autobiography.

This resembles the *interjectional gag* about the girl who went for a ride and had to walk back. "You mean to say," repeated her shocked girlfriend, "that he stopped the car and made you walk back four miles? For goodness sake!" "Yes," agreed the other.

Individuals vary in their reactions to unexpected experiences, and so do their exclamations which are not always interjections. A group of tourists came upon their first breathtaking view of the Grand Canyon. A clergyman among them, visibly moved, uttered, "The Lord be praised!" The man next to him cried, "Well, I'll be damned!"

On a bus two girls were overheard discussing the art of conversation. "If you take some phrases away from some people, like 'You said it!' and 'Right you are!'", you cut their conversation in half." Her companion agreed, "You're telling me? You ain't kidding!"

Interjections not only reveal differences among men but may also distinguish the sexes. Thus a Victorian once suggested this by claiming that a man usually cries, "Alas!" whereas a woman cries, "Amen!"

An exclamation may also prove one's undoing, like the

fisherman who was describing his success. "Man, did I catch a fish! It was enormous—t-h-a-t long! Why, I never saw such a fish!" His friend said simply, "I believe you."

To round out this chapter, a few comments on sentences may be in order since grammar deals with the arrangement of words in a sentence.

To a lexicographer a *sentence* is merely a word, though he explains it as a group of words containing a subject and predicate. At the other end of linguistic knowledge, a bonering schoolboy described a sentence as having two parts—a subject and a predicament.

One meaning of sentence as the decision by a judge on the punishment of a criminal is an effective source of wit. At any rate, a single sentence from a judge is far more effective than a dozen sentences from any other speaker.

A student once defined sentence structure as a jail. Another, when asked if he had ever heard of a sentence without a predicate, answered, "Yes, I have. Thirty days."

A recent nonsensism tells about three little ink spots who were crying because their mother was in the pen and they didn't know how long the sentence would be.

Matrimony, the omnipresent butt of satire, also gets into the act, by explaining that marriage isn't a word but a sentence. Or remarking that the longest sentence consists of only two words: "I do."

Sententious wit of this kind is not confined to matrimonial and other criminal punishments. At a Hollywood party where everyone was talking and interrupting because everyone wanted to be the center of attraction, one peculiar actor jumped up and shouted, "Is there anyone present who wants to hear a sentence finished?"

NEGATIVE ENGLISH

A small-town weekly newspaper, conducting a militant campaign against corruption, headlined one of its news stories: **HALF THE TOWN COUNCIL ACCEPTS BRIBES**. The outraged politicians demanded an apology, and the editor promised to run one in the next issue. The following week the newspaper ran this headline: **HALF THE TOWN COUNCIL DOES NOT ACCEPT BRIBES**.

This story illustrates how the negative can sometimes be of positive value. Other stories and gags deftly double the negative. A woman says to her neighbor: "So you're not going to Paris this year?" "Oh, no," answers the other. "It's Mexico we're not going to this year. It was Paris we didn't go to last year."

Negative English is an everyday occurrence in linguistic wit. It is based on the use of *no*, *not*, the prefix *non-*, and kindred negatives like *never*, *nothing*, *nobody*. And it is found in almost every verbal pattern. The *negative simile* is one such type.

A theory is no more like a fact than a photograph is like a man.

The boner or howler is another. A blundering school-boy once confused adverbs of negation with adverbs of negotiation.

Negative repartee, a dialogue form of comic English,

was once the unfailing support of vaudeville and radio gagsters.

"I'm sorry, sir, but the boss told me to tell you he isn't in." "Okay. Tell him I'm glad I didn't call."

Far more fertile than any of these is the *negativism*. Unlike its counterparts in philosophy and psychology, the negativism in humor represents any saying whose wit is expressed through denial or refusal.

Salt makes potatoes taste flat when you don't use it.

Television lets the people at home see what the studio audience is not laughing at.

A press agent is hired to tell people the clever things you didn't say.

In such epigrams the *double negative* often heightens the satire.

Experience is the one thing you cannot get for nothing.

The most prolific use of the double negative is to caricature the female of the species. As we shall observe a little later, this bias is more biological than logical, and is in line with the eternal feminine negative.

Women love men not because they are men but because they are not women.

A woman never knows what kind of a husband she doesn't want until she marries him.

There are two kinds of women: those who wish to marry, and those who haven't the slightest desire not to.

When I was at high school my English teacher warned me against the use of the double negative. Two negatives, I was told, make an affirmative. This puzzled me because

algebra and photography had taught me otherwise. "I don't want no bread" was supposed to mean "I want bread"—though as a youngster when I insisted "I don't want no bread," my mother knew better.

This feature of grammar is pointed up in linguistic wit. When a door-to-door salesman is rebuffed by a housewife with "No, I don't want no brushes today," he suggests, "Then how about a cheap grammar?"

A once-familiar wall sign in restaurants illustrates the danger of the double negative: "We are not responsible for coats and hats not checked by the management."

At least one important species of negative English appears in comic lexicography—the *negative definition*. This is the explanation of a word in which a clever effect is created by the negative quality of an expression.

etiquette. The noise you don't make while eating soup.

anecdote. A brief account of an incident that never occurred in the life of some celebrity.

will power. The strength of mind not to give up smoking or drinking.

No less prevalent is the technique of *negative grouping*. This masses three or more negatives in playful fashion. Morris Bishop, American versifier and verbalist extraordinary, once wrote a poem, *Not Unmindful of the Negative*, which began:

Not inconsiderable is the sympathy I share
 With the negative-lovers, a not un plentiful lot,
 Yet it is not impossible to be unaware
 Of the disadvantages of the double and quad-
 ruple Not.

Negative grouping is generally a matter of prose rather than verse, and subliterate rather than literature. Artemus Ward used to say, "I'm a plain man. I don't know

nothing about no dead languages, and I'm a little shaky on living ones." This matches the illiterate who is forever boasting that he "don't never get no headaches."

In folklore an occasional *proverb* achieves the same cumulative effect. An Ozark saying runs, "I ain't done nothing nohow." More extensive is the American folk saying, "Nobody don't never get nothing for nothing, nowhere, no time, nohow." Herb Caen, the celebrated San Francisco *Chronicle* columnist, followed this model when, after reporting a good deed he had done for Christmas, he wrote, "Don't say this column never does nothin' for nobody no more."

The same effect may be achieved by grouping terms associated with the idea of absence. A society matron brought her daughter to a renowned piano teacher for an audition. The master listened attentively to the girl's playing, and then said gravely: "The young lady is not without a lack of talent."

Simpler is the language of the negative proverb which wittily twists a familiar saying by denying or disproving it.

A friend not in need is a friend indeed.

The woman who hesitates is not lost; she is extinct.

Such specimens represent the other half of the half-truth that underlies all proverbs, and often the better half.

History never repeats itself; if it did, it would be sociology.

The grammatical proverb that two negatives make an affirmative also comes in for its share of quips.

Two negatives make an affirmative, except with a woman when it takes only one.

Two negatives make an affirmative, but with women they make two affirmatives.

These satiric examples illustrate the *feminine negative*, the caricature of the illogical woman which is older than the English language and probably goes back to Eve herself. If Adam had a sense of humor (the Bible is silent on this point), he must have been the first to realize that a woman's no is nothing. Shakespeare toyed with the idea:

Have you not heard it said full oft
A woman's nay doth stand for nought?

His contemporary, Sir Philip Sidney, the English poet, soldier and statesman, also found it worth ridiculing. "No," he said, "is no negative in a woman's mouth."

Many an epigram satirizes this feminine feature. There are fifty-nine ways of saying *no*, one wit hath writ, and a woman will use any one of them when she consents to something.

Gags too turn on this idea. Specimen dialogue: "Are you asking Jane to your party?" "No, my husband doesn't like her." "I see. And what about Mary?" "No, I'm not asking her either. My husband likes her."

Nor do the *gaglines* of cartoons ignore this feminine trait of being affirmative in the negative. A weeping woman says to her husband: "For days I've been telling you I don't want anything for my birthday—and still you neglected to buy me something!"

Equally equivocal was the reaction of the woman who attended a wedding to which she had not been invited. She explained it this way: "I wasn't so mad that I wasn't invited that I wouldn't come."

But all is not feminine that negates. The *negative adviser*, one of many species of negative sayings, cautions

men more often than women against a course of action, and admonishes a masculine more often than a feminine fault. Unlike its prototype, which ends with a *don't* (Speaking of ailments—*don't*), the negative adviser usually begins with a *don't*.

Don't tell your wife she spends too much; you can never earn enough for her to do that.

Don't gamble unless you can afford to lose, and if you can afford to lose, you don't have to gamble.

The negative adviser sometimes begins with a *never*.

Never call a man a fool; borrow from him instead.

Never tell a woman you are not worthy of her love; she knows.

These epigrams seldom resort to punplay although here and there an example excepts the rule.

Don't go in for farming unless you wish to vegetate.

Negative punning, an extensive class of wit, needs no help from such advisers. Among its many species the *no* pun is prominent. This represents the interplay, expressed or implied, between the negative *no* and the positive *know*.

The modern reformer for example turns the ancient philosopher's maxim into *No Thyself!*

Such wordwit is generally a matter of simple verbal substitution in familiar expressions.

An unsophisticated girl doesn't know all there is to *no*.

Noah certainly did know a lot about shipbuilding.

A yesman believes that whom you don't *no* won't hurt you.

Among the lower levels of negative punning lies juvenile wit, prevalent among schoolboys everywhere.

Small boy: "Dad, what are the holes in this board for?"

Dad: "They are knotholes." Small boy: "If they're not holes, then what are they?"

Related wordplay includes the massing of three or more negatives. The poem by Thomas Hood on wintry weather is of this nature, the last verse reading:

No warmth, no cheerfulness, no healthful ease,
No comfortable feel in any member;
No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees
No fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds,
No-venber.

Negative English, like the poor, is always with us, from first to second childhood. Most of us must surely remember how amused we were with the negative riddle during early schooldays. This is the conundrum type whose question is patterned after the classic specimen: *When is a door not a door?*

Q. When is a boy not a boy? A. When he's a little hoarse.

Q. When is a cat not a cat? A. When it's a kitten.

This form of elementary wordplay every now and then gave forth satiric sparks:

Q. When is an actor not an actor?

A. Nine times out of ten.

At the other end of the negative spectrum lie the felicitous sayings of quotation literature, like Lord Falkland's thought-provoking thought: "When it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change."

SPEECH

A woman called her husband up at the office. "Charles," she said sternly, "when you came in last night you told me that you'd been to the club with Mr. Brown. But I just met Mr. Brown and he said you'd been at the Trocadero Tropical Paradise. Why did you lie, Charles?" "I didn't lie, dear," explained her husband. "I was in no condition last night to pronounce Trocadero Tropical Paradise."

Sobriety is no assurance of proper *pronunciation* either. A feminine voice over the phone asked, "Hello, are you Harry?" The masculine voice on the other end replied, "Not especially, miss, but I'm far from bald."

Words of foreign derivation complicate the problem of English speech. A woman travelling by bus was talking with a man in the adjoining seat. Describing her holiday, she remarked that she had visited San Jose. "You pronounce that wrong," corrected the man. "In California all *j*'s are pronounced like *h*'s. When were you there?" The woman reflected a moment, then answered, "In Hune and Huly."

An American colonel was bantering a cultivated Japanese on the difficulty of his countrymen to pronounce the letter *l*. "You are always changing the *l* to *r*," he said. "You call our Presidents Abraham Rincorn and Frankrin D. Roosevert, and our states Carifornia and

Florida." The American officer went on while the Japanese listened patiently. "When we write an *l*," he concluded, "we pronounce it *l*. Why can't you do the same?" Gently the Japanese replied, "Is that a fact, Colonel?"

The most familiar of all stories of this type describes a conversation between two linguists, one of whom observed, "Did you know that there's only one word in English beginning with 'sz' that's pronounced like 'shu'?" "Really?" asked the other, "what is the word?" "Sugar," said the first man. Sarcastically the other inquired, "Are you sure?"

Another specimen, popular generations ago, was the vaudeville gag that ran: "I et six eggs for breakfast this morning." "You should say ate." "Well, maybe it was eight I et."

The *alternative-pronunciation story* is based on the different ways a word is sounded or stressed. The train-caller of American jokelore is a classic of this kind. A Western mining town along a railroad during the frontier days was named Eurelia, but no one knew what its correct pronunciation was. Every conductor and brakeman who would call the station had his own version. As a train one day neared this station, a brakeman stuck his head in one end of the coach and shouted, "You're a liar! You're a liar!" Almost at once a dissenting brakeman put his head in the other end of the car and called, "You really are! You really are!"

A more recent anecdote relates how a customer entered a tobacco shop and asked for a package of Paul Malls. "Paul Mauls? Yes, sir," said the clerk. Shortly thereafter another man asked for a package of Pal Mals. "Pal Mals? Yes, sir," said the clerk. Then a third customer came in and asked for a package of Pell Mells. "Pell Mells? Yes, sir," said the clerk. A puzzled bystander turned to the salesman. "How do you pronounce the

name of those cigarettes?" he inquired. The salesman replied, "Just like the customer does."

A switch on the alternative-pronunciation story tells how an American tourist who was planning a trip abroad, asked a friend: "Did you say the Rhine or Rhone? I've heard it pronounced both ways."

Enunciation too breeds wit. When a waiter inquired of a professor of English if he had asked for "chocolate puddin'," the educator replied, "No, and I hope I never shall."

More catastrophic was the unclear enunciation of a certain farmer in the South. He told the new farmhand to take out the mule and have her shod, but the laborer had her shot instead.

One type of enunciation, described in the chapter on *Ambiguity* because it commonly leads to amusing misinterpretations, is *linking speech*. A freshman was severely reprimanded for insulting the short-legged dean when he had merely enunciated too rapidly, "That's our dean."

On the other hand, when a professor asked him, "Can you tell me which is the olfactory organ?", he answered, "No, sir." Whereupon the professor said, "Correct."

The speech differences between the Americans and the British are probably not so great as the speech differences within their countries. A London Cockney emigrated to America and after a year's time he sent for his wife. "Gawd blimey!" she exclaimed, "but don't they talk funny in this country." Her husband smiled. "You think they talk funny *now*!" he said. "You should 'ave 'eard them when I first got 'ere."

This recalls another Cockney who married an American girl. Their young daughter, when asked what her nationality was, replied, "I'm half and 'arf."

During World War II the disparity in speech between American and British officers sometimes led to odd misunderstandings. On one occasion two colonels, one American and the other an Englishman who spoke with a marked Oxford accent, encountered an American lieutenant. The English officer addressed a question to the lieutenant who, instead of replying, remained embarrassingly silent. Finally the American colonel said impatiently, "Please answer the colonel's question." Whereupon the lieutenant explained, "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't understand French."

If some Americans think British speech more like French than their own tongue, the French also recognize the dissimilarity between the two brands of *anglais*. In more than one French town will be found the sign: ENGLISH SPOKEN. AMERICAN UNDERSTOOD. A recent story tells about a vacationing American farmer who arrived at a small French town but couldn't understand a word of French. No one spoke English there, so he retired to his hotel and was awakened early in the morning by a rooster crowing. Bursting into wild delight at the sound, he cried out, "Thank God! An American at last!"

The humor of *accents* also adds to the gaiety of English. It shows up both words and people—and even animals. In some words the stress given to a certain syllable can be revealing. In *triumph* the accent is on the first syllable, and in *incentive* the accent is on money. No less revealing was the behavior of the man who kept drinking out of Dixie cups in order to acquire a Southern accent.

A Frenchman brought his talking cat to see a Broadway booking agent. "Zis cat, she is extraordinaire," he explained excitedly. "I have taught her to speak ze Mother Goose. Leesten, and she recite." The astonished booking agent listened as the cat recited one nursery

rhyme after another, all with a decided French accent. When the cat had finished, the Frenchman beamed. "Now," he asked, "how about ze contract?" "Sorry," replied the agent, "I can't use her—not with that accent."

An American tourist was telling about an incident that had occurred when he visited the Tower of London. A Briton had got into conversation with him. "American, aren't you?" he asked after a while. "I thought so, from your accent." The tourist back home related the happening with anger. "The nerve of the guy, making a crack like that," he cried, "when *he* was the one who had the accent!"

Slang is to formal English what the younger generation is to the older. Just as life is unthinkable without waves of younger generations, so language is impossible without the everflowing streams of slang. The judicious grammarian does not criticize slang but deplores its abuse and overuse. He is aware that it colors language with flash and humor, and that it is as essential to English as technical vocabularies.

Slang pervades every branch of verbal communication, creating fresh and picturesque expressions constantly. Citing the field of music, slang offers comic synonyms like groan box for accordion, Godbox for organ, corn-on-the-cob for harmonica, Madam Cadenza for a flighty female vocalist, town crier for a loud male vocalist, woodchopper for a xylophonist.

A satirist once observed that slang has one advantage over good English: when you use it most people understand exactly what you mean. He was referring of course to general and not teenage slang which is not always clear to adults. The slang of adolescents is also notorious for its evanescence, which may explain the sign in a Brooklyn corner drugstore: "Teenage spoken here."

Shoptalk is less transitory. A businessman said, "I'm in

the girdle-and-brassiere business—what we on the inside call the Meat Packing Industry.”

More enduring, too, as readers of Ring Lardner know, is the slanguage of sports. One reporter ambiguously described a girls' baseball game: “Everything was going fine for the local girls until the last half of the fifth when all the bags got loaded.”

Many verbal devices go into the formation of slang. One of these is the figurative use of standard words, as in the sign that was erected near the speakers' platform at a political convention for the benefit of press photographers. It read: “Do not photograph the speakers while they are addressing the audience. Shoot them as they approach the platform.”

Occupational jargon is a rich class of colorful speech, with counterman slang a favorite type. A has-been actor of the old school entered a lunch-wagon, fixed his eye on the countergirl, and declaimed in his theatrical manner: “Prithee, give me some ham, piping hot, fragrant with the flavor of cloves, brown sugar and tasty sauce. Serve it between fresh slices of nourishing brown and buttered bread. And draw for your faithful servant a cup of aromatic coffee with cream that is rich and pure.” The countergirl gave him a frigid glance, turned to the kitchen, and cried, “Pig on rye and java with.”

The history of *dialect humor* in the United States is mainly confined to the period between the Civil War and World War I. This period witnessed the rise and fall of our most illustrious comic journals—*Puck*, *Judge* and the old *Life*—much of whose comedy ridiculed Negroes and foreign-born. Such humor flourished during the great waves of immigration and ended after they were reduced to a trickle by legislation. It was radio, however, the first advertising medium of mass entertainment, that gave the comedy of dialect its *coup de grâce*.

The comic press, the silent movies and vaudeville all milked the speech blunders of minority groups or exploited racial stereotypes. The Negro, the Irish, the German, the Jew, the Swede, and even the Scot were the standard butts of laughter. Most of the dialect writers found this antisocial climate congenial, like Irvin S. Cobb, a leading dialect storyteller. Even humorous writers of a higher literary caliber, like the Canadian Stephen Leacock, were not altogether immune from this virus. Rare indeed was the humorist who, writing dialect during this period, laughed with rather than at the foreign-born American, the most notable being Finley Peter Dunne, creator of the remarkable "Mr. Dooley."

Franklin P. Adams once satirized the Irvin S. Cobbs of his time by quoting a colored man who not only spoke a dialect but spoke it with several accents. Gazing at the final half-inch of his cigar, he said, "Vell, Ay tank Oi am g-g-gettin' to de end of mah rope."

Though the chief resource of dialect humor has been the ridicule of racial and national minority groups, many a specimen is anything but antisocial. An American girl was wandering about the London zoo when an excited keeper rushed up to her and cried, "There's a moose loose!" "Oh!" exclaimed the girl. Then she recovered sufficiently to ask, "Are you a Scotsman or an Englishman?"

A similar story tells about a Scotsman on a visit to Canada who noticed the mounted head of a bull moose hanging in the hall of the house where he was staying. He asked his host what sort of animal it was. "Oh, that's a moose," said his host. "A moose?" repeated the surprised Scotsman. "Mon, if that's a moose, what must your rats be like over here?"

Brooklynese stands for a special comic dialect today much as *Bostonese* half a century ago stood for a comic

Oxford accent. Among its prominent features is the interchange of *oi* and *er*, as in loin and learn, voice and verse, oily and early. Only a Brooklyn cook will apologize for berling the ersters in erl and sperling them.

A Brooklyn schoolteacher took her class to visit the zoo. At the birdhouse one of the pupils exclaimed, "Gee, dose boids choip pretty." "Those aren't 'boids,' they're 'birds,'" corrected the teacher. "Gee," replied the youngster, "dey choip just like boids."

A verse variant of the above spoofs the budding Bronx, for the vulgate speech of Brooklyn does not differ from that heard in other parts of New York City.

De spring is sprung,
De grass is riz,
I wonder where dem boidies is?

De little boids is on de wing,
Ain't dat absoid?
De little wings is on de boid.

Another phonetic feature of Brooklynese is the substitution of *d* and *t* for the two sounds of *th*, like the Brooklynite who gave his insomniac friend some sleeping pills, saying, "Take dese and doze."

Then there was the young social worker who visited a Brooklyn home and found a four-year-old sucking at a nursing bottle. Shocked, she lectured the child's mother, telling her it was wrong for a child so old to use a bottle, that it was bad for his teeth, it would lead other children to ridicule him, they would call him Baby, and he would acquire an inferiority complex. In the midst of her lecture, the little fellow pulled the nipple from his mouth and turning angrily toward the social worker, said, "Hoits you?"

Cockney London plays a conspicuous role in English jocular literature, with the peculiarities of speech sub-

ordinate to the varieties of satire. In American popular comedy the Cockney makes an inconspicuous appeal, and is limited to one phase of dialect, the adding and dropping of aitches.

There was one Cockney who couldn't decide which of his two sweethearts to marry, Maggie or Maria. So he posed his problem to the parish priest who told him to go into the church and pray for a decision. A few minutes later he rushed to the priest in great excitement and cried, "Gor Blimey, Father, it's a miracle." "Why, what happened?" asked the priest. "I went to say a prayer in front of the statue of Our Lady," explained the Cockney, "and so I goes up to the haltar and there, on the blue cloth in letters of gold, it says, 'Ave Maria.' "

An American in a London pub was puzzled when a Cockney with whom he had struck up a conversation remarked that there were hate letters in the phrase, "I love you." The light dawned upon him when the Londoner began to count the letters.

Brogue comedy may be said to go back to Elizabethan times when the language was pronounced more like the Irish than the English of today. This is evident from Shakespeare's puns, like the phonetic identity of reason with raisin. In American jocular literature, however, the vogue of brogue comedy passed out with the passing of the Pat-and-Mike gags of vaudeville.

Currently only an occasional broguish item appears in American print, like the saying that the modern miss is weak in the nays. Or the Irish wellerism: "And there I lave ye," as the wave said to the pier.

The Irishman who said, "Me fate is in your hands," was talking to a chiropodist, not an astrologer.

"And now," said the emcee at an Irish party, "the next dance will be a snake dance. Those who snaked in can snake out."

A current specimen tells about the passenger on a small boat who asked a man on deck, "Are you the mate of the ship?" "No, sir," replied the Irish cook, "I'm the man that cooks the mate."

In comic lexicography the *brogue definition* explains words whose Irish pronunciation makes them sound like other words. *Foyer* means an Irish blaze and *say* refers to the Irish sea.

These resemble *Cockney definitions* where a *tiler* is one who makes suits. In other dialect definitions a *coil* means a Brooklyn curl, a *yolk* means a Swedish jest, etc.

Speech humor embraces imperfect speech of all kinds—regional pronunciation as well as diction due to vocal defects.

An alert copyreader on a newspaper couldn't believe it when he read a reporter's account of the theft of 2025 pigs. That's a lot of pigs, he thought, and called the farmer to check the copy. "Is it true that you lost 2025 pigs?" he asked. "Yeth," lisped the farmer. "Thanks," returned the copyreader, and corrected the story to read "two sows and 25 pigs."

Such stories characterize the comedy of *lisp*ing though most specimens resort to clever lispeech, as in the old proverb that none kitheth like the lithping mith.

Upon being introduced to a minister, a lisperer said, "Your faith lookth familiar."

A lisping child bonered that "a panther is a man who makth panth." This matches Ogden Nash's rhyme: "If called by a panther, don't anther."

The *lisp pun* is the substitution of the *s* or *z* sound for *th*, or vice versa, in closely related words. A recent instance is the parody of the ubiquitous office THINK sign which a wag revised to THINK—OR THWIM.

A parallel case in point is the frozen-food sign: *Best Meals You Ever Thaw.*

Another punning specimen is found in a rhyme that parodies a familiar verse:

"Where are you going, my pretty maid?
 Why do you pass me by?"
 "I'm on my way to danthing thchool,"
 She lithped as she heaved a thigh.

A classified ad in a small-town newspaper ran: "LOST—An upper dental plate on Main Street over the weekend. Please return to Box 34 ath thoon ath pothible."

Then there was the case of the girl among whose boy-friends was a lisper. One day he called her on the phone and said, "Ith that you, Ruth? Well, gueth who thith ith?"

The exclusive non-rhyming word in English is *month*, and for centuries poets had ransacked their brains and dictionaries for a word with a corresponding sound. It was finally found when a desperate poet appealed to his housemaid:

"Sally, please give me a rhyme for month."
 "Thirtainly, thir, I'll do it at onth."

Of all speech disorders *stuttering* used to lead the field in laughter. The leading exponent of such entertainment during the past generation was the comedian Joe Frisco, but it is significant that his brand of comedy was unwelcome over the air waves. The rise of radio and television synchronized with the public realization that in large measure stuttering is the most antisocial form of speech humor.

Misunderstanding and misinterpretation are the distinctive features of the comedy of *whispering*. This fol-

lows from identifying the soft, low sounds in whispering with private and secret matters. A man was troubled with a hoarse throat so that his voice barely rose above a whisper. He went to his doctor whose pretty wife answered the bell. "Is the doctor in?" he whispered. "No, come in," whispered back the wanton lady.

Another specimen is set in an ice-cream parlor where the waitress was hoarse. A young man asked, "What flavors of ice cream do you have?" The pretty waitress answered in a husky voice, "Vanilla, chocolate and strawberry." Trying to be sympathetic, the young man said, "You got laryngitis?" "No," she replied, "only vanilla, chocolate and strawberry."

Cold or "*code*" speech is another brand of comic English. One man meets another and asks, "How did you catch such a bad cold?" The other says, "Adswering the siddy fools who ask be how I badaged to gatch this gold. Good bordig."

In this type of speech the nasal sounds are altered because a cold in the head closes the passage of the nose so that one cannot utter clearly. Phonetic stops like *b*, *d* and *g* generally replace nasal sounds like *m*, *n*, and *ng*, but no single group of speech sounds really distinguishes a voice with a cold. For example, two men with colds are talking. "Yes," says one, "I've god ad idferdal code." "Tagk a logg walk id the oped air," advises the other. "That's how I god rid of bide."

Phonetic comedy like cold speech is often given a telephone setting. A man suffering from a cold in the head was phoning a friend who had difficulty understanding him: "No! Nod D! D! D as id Dennessee!"

A newspaper headline writer used this device once when former President Eisenhower flew to southern California: "Ige's Code Seds Hib To Desert."

The fairy tale of the conceited elephant deserves a

place here. This elephant thought she was the most beautiful creature in the world. Every morning she would spend hours beautifying herself. She would bathe in the river and admire her reflection in the water. Then she would splash about and, with her long trunk, squirt fountains of water into the air. She would rub and shine her ivory tusks until they gleamed in the sunlight. One day, while bathing in the river, this vain elephant was unaware that an alligator lurked nearby. As she dipped her trunk in the water, the alligator opened its huge jaws and snapped it off. Dazed by what happened, she glared at the alligator and grunted, "Hmm! Berry fuddy!"

A minor species of diction not found in dictionaries is the *speech definition* which imitates the sound of the word being defined.

lisp. To call a spade a thpade.

growl. To snar-r-rl angr-r-rily.

stammer. To st-st-stutter.

Radio and television have made *speech testing* a matter of some importance and many are the tests given to would-be broadcasting announcers. These range from brief tongue-twisters, like "truly rural," "some shun sunshine," and "the cricket critic" repeated in quick succession, to multisentence paragraphs involving a variety of words difficult to articulate.

One of the better diction tests requiring rapid repetition looks deceptively simple: Many a wit is not a whit wittier than Whittier.

We have come a long way from such wit to the grim and classic testword of the bible. This was the shibboleth, the Hebrew word by which Jephthah distinguished the fleeing Ephraimites, who could not pronounce the *sh*, from his own men the Gileadites (Judges 12:4-6).

RHYMING ENGLISH

The leading techniques in humorous English are phonetic. The first is punning, the second, rhyming. In recent decades comic verse has replaced light verse in popular appeal much as light verse began to replace the great Victorian poets during earlier decades.

Poets do not distinguish between light and comic verse though these compositions aim in different directions. Comic versifiers like Ogden Nash are non-emotional. They play with the language and incline toward topical themes. On the other hand, light versifiers like John Betjeman do not run from matters emotional, and are dexterous masters of form. Comic versifiers write in ordinary, non-figurative speech because their audience is a general one whereas light versifiers, appealing to a narrower public, express themselves in a choicer idiom.

Ever since Thomas Hood won a large audience with his puns, followed by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll with their nonsense, and W. S. Gilbert with his bravura cleverness, the tradition of comic rhyming has widened enormously. Today millions enjoy the clever verses which lighten our magazines of mass circulation.

The humor of rhyming English embraces all types of rhyme, including prose types, as well as most forms of verse. It ranges from the cheer of nonsense to the jeer of satire. Nonsense has always performed a leading role in

verse but parody, the runner-up of the past when serious poetry was widely popular, is at present falling behind satire and caricature.

Every nursery rhyme and every memorable poem used to be parodied endlessly. Over half a century ago everyone recited parodies on Longfellow's *Village Blacksmith*, *Excelsior* (which Bret Harte ridiculed while extolling the merits of *Sapolio* soap), *Hiawatha* and other poems much as their children parodied Kilmer's *Trees*. Couplets and triplets especially surrender to parody because they are so easily recalled and repeated.

The saddest words of tongue and pen:
"We just sold Junior's buggy, then—"

Tiger, tiger, burning bright,
How you save electric light.

Familiarity breeds parody but some of the better specimens are caviar to the general.

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me
you were dead,
They rang me up at half-past-two, and
got me out of bed.

A primrose on the river's brim,
A dicotyledon was to him,
And it was nothing more.

The prose parodist who spoofs a leading stylist of his time like Faulkner or Hemingway is never as effective as the parodist who epitomizes in a simple snatch of verse a well-known quotation. This has led to lower and lower levels of rhyming take-offs so that more parody is found today in juvenile than in adult humor. The sentimental "roses are red, violets are blue" quatrain of 19th-century valentines turned into early 20th-century parodies, and

eventually ended up as children's album verses. In jocular literature twisted rhymes often descend to a depth where one man's rhyme is another man's crime. No wonder one wit wrote, "O parody, what rhymes are committed in thy name!"

Caricature and satire like parody are equally at home in verse and prose. The topical verse specimens, however clever, quickly pass from the scene. In 1907 Elinor Glyn's best-selling novel *Three Weeks* brought forth many a suggestive rhyme of which the following was the cleverest:

Would you like to sin,
 With Elinor Glyn,
 On a tiger skin?
 Or would you prefer,
 To err with her,
 On some other fur?

Non-topical rhymes of similar merit have a more enduring appeal and often survive as jokelore.

All animals are strictly dry,
 They sinless live and quickly die;
 But sinful, ginful, rum-soaked men
 Survive for three-score years and ten.

The limits of comic rhyming are reached when verse goes beyond the ridicule of the vices and follies of men to the contempt of their evils and abuses.

A little stealing is a dangerous part,
 But stealing largely is a noble art;
 'Tis mean to rob a hen-roost or a hen,
 But stealing millions makes us gentlemen.

The best of humorous rhymes, or rather the best-known, are the nonsense specimens. Some of Lewis Car-

roll's, like *Jabberwocky*, and Edward Lear's, like *The Owl and the Pussycat*, have been memorized by generations of nonsense-lovers. Curiously enough the creator of the "little Willies," a nonsense pattern second only to the legendary limerick, is virtually unknown. Harry Graham immortalized the brat who is always with us by ingeniously fusing sadism with nonsense, thus achieving an intenser comic effect than any produced by the innumerable host of comic strippers since Wilhelm Busch gave birth to his mischievous Max and Moritz. There are currently more syndicated gag panels caricaturing kids than any other type of cartoon, but none of their antics attains the savage lunacy of little Willie.

Into the cistern little Willie
Pushed his little sister Lillie.
Mother couldn't find her daughter—
Now we sterilize our water.

It is likely that, from the everflowing stream of anonymous tidbits, a lot of nonsense now and then, instead of the proverbial little, is relished by the wisest men. These verses generally follow a conventional rhyming pattern offering mock logic, self-contradiction, and other fooleries.

As I was going up the stair,
I met a man who wasn't there.
He wasn't there again today—
I wish, I wish he'd stay away!

A centipede was happy quite
Until a frog, in fun,
Said, "Pray, which leg comes after which?"
This raised her mind to such a pitch
She lay distracted in a ditch,
Reflecting how to run.

'Tis midnight, and the setting sun
 Is rising slowly in the west;
 The rapid rivers slowly run,
 The frog is on his downy nest.
 The pensive goat and sportive cow
 Chirp and flit from bough to bough.

The absurd ditty known as the *limerick*, popularized if not created by Edward Lear over a century ago, is the most versatile of comic verse patterns. It is fluid and flexible enough to fit into every comic mold, and can easily be shaped into all kinds of whimsical rhymes, rhythms and verbal effects. There have been limericks on limericks, limerick caricatures and parodies, bilingual and foreign-language limericks, and rhymeless limericks to end all limericks. Since the best specimens are unprintable, and since the best printable specimens are overly familiar, there is no need to repeat any here. The reader who wishes to pursue this subject will find a considerable body of literature in print, including an account of its history and variety in my *Humor of Humor*.

Comic rhymes take many forms. In the 17th and 18th centuries John Dryden and Alexander Pope fashioned the heroic couplet—two successive and rhyming lines of poetry of the same length—into the dominant verse form of English literature. Now, two centuries later, the *couplet* is primarily a complete two-line verse, clever instead of heroic, and rapidly assuming an established place in humorous English. Specimens appear frequently in our national magazines and are enjoyed by millions of readers who, if quizzed, couldn't name a single poem by Dryden or Pope. In its descent from the sublime to the ridiculous the couplet has shed all restraints except rhyme, and the license it takes is more comic than poetic.

The greatest master of this form was probably Arthur

Guiterman, the American magazine contributor, whose *Poet's Proverbs* is tops in the field.

Don't tell your friends about your indigestion:
"How are you!" is a greeting, not a question.

Leading comic poets are seldom at their best in this tradition though their compositions are often widely quoted, like *The Baby* by Ogden Nash:

A bit of talcum
Is always walcum.

Worthy of mention in this field is Richard Armour who has also minted a number of quotable two-liners, like this inscription for a fly swatter:

The hand is quicker than the eye is,
But somewhat slower than the fly is.

Among specific types of couplets is the *mock epitaph*, most specimens of which are anonymous. David McCord's pointed epitaph on a waiter is only seven words short:

By and by
God caught his eye.

Proverbial twists give themselves readily to comic rhymes.

Man's inhumanity to man is human
Compared to woman's inhumanity to woman.

The term *terse verse* is applied to the shortest of couplets where brevity is the whole as well as the soul of wit. In these tidbits the title is often as important as the verse. The following verselet is called *Cats and Dogs*:

While one ignores you,
The other adores you.

The classic specimen is almost as tiny as the viruses whose antiquity it reports:

Adam
Had 'em

A new kind of terse verse arose recently. This couplet follows a four-word pattern with the second line a one-word rhyme.

He who itches
Twitches.

The ease with which such brevity can be composed explains its sudden rise and fall. Samples: He who indulges / Bulges. He who gives / Lives. She who teases / Pleases. He who smirks / Irks. He who tarries / Marries.

The *clerihew* is a form of comic verse somewhat popular in England but not in America. It consists of two couplets of different rhymes and irregular rhythms, the opening line ending with the name of a celebrity. The text describes an episode, true or false, about this celebrity.

Sir Christopher Wren
Said, "I'm going to dine with some men.
If anybody calls
Say I am designing St. Paul's."

Sir Humphry Davy
Detested gravy.
He lived in the odium
Of having discovered sodium.

The people of Spain think Cervantes
Equal to half-a-dozen Dantes:

An opinion resented most bitterly
By the people of Italy.

These specimens were composed by Edmund Clerihew Bentley, inventor of this verse form, and author of the celebrated detective story, *Trent's Last Case*.

An American exponent of clerihews is the poet and punster Louis Untermeyer, one of whose verses runs:

Andrew Jackson
Was Anglo-Saxon;
So, full of beans,
He took New Orleans.

Poetic justice warrants a clerihew on Bentley himself:

E. C. Bentley
Should not be treated gently.
Give the devil his dues—
He invented clerihews.

Apart from standard patterns like the clerihew, comic verse may be classified according to technique. *Linking*, for example, is based on the phonetic merger of adjacent words so as to convey a double meaning. Here is a four-liner from Oliver Herford, a lesser American counterpart of Edward Lear, who plays with such linkage.

My sense of sight is very keen,
My sense of hearing weak;
One time I saw a mountain pass
But could not hear it speak.

Another technique is *reverse verse* which employs clever transposition. The following epitaph on a drunkard illustrates this device:

He had his beer
From year to year,
And then his bier had him.

Another important process which supplies many a quotable rhyme is *analogy*.

If one thing is that, and two things are those,
Then hat in the plural should always be hose;
The masculine pronouns are he, his and him,
But imagine the feminine she, shis and shim.

The *rhyming split* combines two techniques—rhyming and splitting. Verbal elements are sometimes split at the ends of light-verse lines in deference to comedy but in defiance of syllabication. Over a century ago George Canning, the British statesman, gave impetus to the rhyming split by his classic poem, *The University of Gottingen*, whose every stanza ended in such fashion:

When'er with haggard eyes I view
This dungeon that I'm rotting in,
I think of those companions true
Who studied with me at the U
—niversity of Gottingen,
—niversity of Gottingen.

Lewis Carroll reveled in the illogic of both prose and verse and took advantage of such poetic license in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

Beautiful soup! Who cares for fish,
Game, or any other dish?
Who would not give all else for two p-
ennyworth only of beautiful soup?

Other comic versifiers have indulged in verbal fractures of this kind, notably W. S. Gilbert who, not content to break his word in verse, also split with Sir Arthur Sullivan.

A far more familiar combination of techniques is

rhyming and punning. Doggerel delights in it, and even an occasional nursery rhyme.

Doctor Bell fell down the well
 And broke his collarbone.
 Doctors should attend the sick
 And leave the well alone.

Thomas Hood is the supreme master of *pun verse* in English. His *Faithless Nelly Gray* is a hardy perennial in humorous anthologies with its first and last stanzas:

Ben Battle was a soldier bold,
 And used to war's alarms;
 But a cannon ball took off his legs,
 And he laid down his arms. . . .
 A dozen men sat on his corpse,
 A verdict for to tell;
 They went and told the sexton, and
 The sexton tolled the bell.

Although most adults are or pretend to be anti-punsters, *anti-pun verse* is rare in comic literature. Among such rare rhymes are the well-done *Cautionary Verses* by Theodore Hook.

My little dears, who learn to read,
 Pray early learn to shun
 That very silly thing indeed
 Which people call a pun. . . .
 The dyer who by dyeing lives,
 A dire life maintains;
 The glazier, it is known, receives
 His profits for his panes. . . .

Hook fills these verses with puns while cautioning his young readers against them, and ends with the usual *punishment* pun. The punishment pun also appears in the

most famous of all doggerel, often credited to Dr. Johnson.

If for every pun I shed,
I were to be punishèd,
I could not find a puny shed
Wherein to hide my punnish head.

Also dealing with punishment is a rare specimen of anti-pun limerick:

A father once said to his son,
"The next time you make up a pun,
Go out in the yard,
And kick yourself hard,
And I shall begin when you've done."

The reaction to anti-pun verse is of course anti-anti, an even rarer kind of verse. The following couple of couplets (ill-favored things, but mine own) may be offered as samples of such pro-punning.

The man who never has been known to pun
Will groan to point out he's a judge of one.
To people below the norm of humor
The pun is the lowest form of humor.

From the cradle to the grave are we surrounded by the wit of rhyming, from nursery rhymes to advertising slogans. The *rhyming riddle*, once a literary diversion, eventually descended to a juvenile folk device. Sometimes it rhymes with the introduction:

A riddle, a riddle, as I suppose,
What has many eyes, but never a nose?

Sometimes too the rhyming riddle omits the opening as well as the closing query.

As round as an apple, as deep as a cup,
And all the king's horses can't pull it up.

At the other extreme lies a rich harvest of *rhyming epigrams*.

Fish can be bought if they can't be caught.

Many a snob acts as if it's her duty to be snooty.

In a happy marriage, she takes care of his ills and he takes care of her bills.

Many a rhyming epigram is nothing more than a rhyming proverb that has been twisted.

A little flattery now and then makes husbands out of single men.

He who stops to look each way will live to drive another day.

Non-rhyming proverbs may also be turned into rhyming epigrams.

Where there's a will, there's a lawyer's bill.

All things come to those who wait, but by that time they're out-of-date.

'Tis better to have loved and lost than to be married and divorced.

The division between rhyming prose and verse is not always definite. Couplets are sometimes printed in epigram form though the disguise is unconvincing. Sometimes, too, rhyming epigrams combine both metrical and non-metrical sequences.

He who sells what isn't his'n must buy it back or go to prison.

The smile that over cocktails looks ethereal is not so charming over breakfast cereal.

You can't beat the weather: spring is too rainy and summer too hot; fall is soon over and winter is not.

The *triple-rimer* is an epigram comprising a trio of consecutive words or phrases that rhyme.

There are three kinds of drivers: urban, suburban, and bourbon.

Some marriages are first announced, then denounced, and finally renounced.

There are three kinds of friends: best friends, guest friends, and pest friends.

These triplets and related multiple rimers involving more than three rhymes belong to *rhyme grouping*. This technique leans heavily on affixation, but the rhymes need not carry genuine prefixes or suffixes.

Love is a little sighing, a little crying, a little dying, and a lot of lying.

Drunkenness is marked by five stages: jocose, morose, bellicose, lachrymose, and comatose.

You cannot enter the kingdom of God without election, subjection and inspection—otherwise it's rejection.

An odd case of multiple rimer arose in the early days of the town of Ross, Tasmania. At the four corners of its main intersection were a public hall, an inn, a military barracks and a church. This gave rise to its description as the place of "recreation, temptation, damnation and salvation."

Among the many types of comic *definitions* are the rhyming species. These are generally on a popular or sub-literary level.

hiccup. A belch you can't squelch.

apiarist. A farmer who makes money because his bees make honey.

In some definitions three words constitute the rhyme.

incest. Kin in sin.

bracer. A stimulating drink that puts you in the pink in a wink.

In other rhyming definitions the correspondence covers internal rhymes.

shrew. The Mrs. who hisses her husband.

patriot. A good citizen who bides his laws and chides his lawmakers.

Of all prose rhymes nothing equals the *rhyming phrase* in frequency. In comic lexicography it usually consists of two consecutive words in rhyme. A coward is a yellow fellow, a woman driver is a fender bender, a witch doctor is a sinister minister, a well-dressed girl is a slick chick, twins are double trouble, and a wisecracker is one who flips quips.

Things as well as persons are described in rhyming phrases. A compliment is a cheerful earful, dread is sheer fear, and necking is a passion fashion.

Occasionally these expressions are put in *sandwich rhyme*, a pattern where a word is squeezed in between rhyming words. Melancholy is the dearth of mirth, a diamond is class in glass, and an idea is a notion without motion.

Puzzles and games have been made out of such expressions to test one's verbal ingenuity. Non-rhyming phrases like dumb cherub, ruthless combat, healthy dog are proposed, the answers being two-word rhymes like stupid Cupid, cruel duel, sound hound.

Phrasal rhymes also embrace the bewildering world of *rhyming slang* where fashions, at least in teenage talk, come and go as rapidly as the changing drapes and shapes

of women's wear. Some fashions last much longer than others, like the zoot-suit slang of World War II, popularized by the hep cats of swing music, which was not unlike the jive jargon of jazz devotees a decade later. The zoot-suit was an exaggerated style of men's clothing having reat pleats, jut cuts, cleave sleeves and stuffed cuffs.

Rhyming slang among adults is of slower growth and decay than the evanescent argot of teenagers. Originating in the specialized language of criminals to disguise their practices, it spread eventually to many occupations and fields of activity. The more humorous and colorful expressions, like face lace for beard, are sometimes extended to general usage.

Rhyming slang is occasionally featured in the humor of writers and columnists, like describing a husband and wife as spouse and strife, or a gun moll as a tough pullet with a fast bullet. But humorous writers borrow more slang than they create, and their fresh coinages are rarely adopted as the common currency of rhyming slang.

Wit and whimsy invade the province of figurative language where the rhyme may turn a *simile* into a smile, as:

Sympathy without relief is like mustard without beef.

More conspicuous than such rhyming figures of speech are *rhyming jokes*. A minister was interrupted at dinner by the hammering noise of carpenters nearby. He said: "Scripture teaches us to love the sinner and hate the sin. Well, I must say I love this dinner, but I hate this din."

A man was seeing a friend off to St. Louis. "When you get there," he said, "be sure to look up my friend, Mr. Lummac." "Lummac?" repeated the other. "Yes. You can easily remember the name because it rhymes with stomach." A week later the friend returned and re-

ported, "You know, I tried and tried, but I could never find that Mr. Kelly."

Seeking shelter under a tree during a terrifying thunderstorm, Dean Jonathan Swift joined a small party of young people there. All looked frightened. Among them was a lovely girl who was sobbing in the arms of her young man. Swift was told that she wept because the storm had prevented her from getting to church to marry her companion. "Never mind," said Swift, "I'll marry you here and now." Taking out his prayerbook, he performed the ceremony, his words being punctuated with fearful flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder. He then took a sheet from his case and wrote and signed the following marriage certificate:

Under a tree in stormy weather,
I married this man and woman together.
Let none but him who rules the thunder
Sever this man and woman asunder.

NAMEPLAY

There are few classes of linguistic humor more inclusive or extensive than nameplay. Its scope covers history, literature, biography as well as all the arts and sciences. When we say that a social gathering was followed by an Emily Post-mortem, or explain love as the comedy of Eros, or describe Aeneas as the first man to cut a Dido, we are resorting to nameplay no less than the advertising agency that coins Frigidaire as the brand name for a refrigerator.

Place names make up a leading class of such humor. The classic story describes an American on a visit to England who had difficulty with the pronunciation of English place names as well as surnames. He was constantly being corrected by his English friend who sounded Barugt as Barf, Beaulieu as Bewly, and Cholmondeley as Chumly. He was also embarrassed in Oxford because he didn't know that Magdalene College is pronounced Maudlin. Not long thereafter when his friend expressed a desire to visit the United States, the American asked him what special places he would like to see there. "I'd like to see Niagara Falls," said the Englishman. The American looked puzzled, and asked, "What place is that?" "Niagara Falls," repeated the Englishman. "How do you spell it?" asked the American. The Englishman did so. "Oh," cried the American with a look of surprise, "you mean Niffles."

Another place-name story is also set in England between an Englishman and an American. They were discussing the cordial relations between their countries. "It's strange," said the American, "that we were once deadly enemies. Why, in 1812 you invaded us and destroyed many of our historic shrines. You even burned Washington." "My word!" exclaimed the Englishman, "I know we had burned Joan of Arc, but I didn't know we had burned Washington!"

Comedy of this kind sometimes takes the form of geographical epigrams, or what are technically called *geograms*.

In Cuba they raise cane to make rum, and drink rum to raise Cain.

In Hollywood husbands are as hard to keep as secrets.

Many a city is given a playful *nickname*. Honolulu is called Hulahula, Manhattan Madhattan, Hollywood Follywood, etc. Lynn, Massachusetts, the shoe center, is the City of Soles; Hot Springs, Arkansas, is Vapor City; and San Francisco is clipped into Frisco and twisted into Fransancisco. Clipping makes a play for many places: Tac for Tacoma, Washington; Tol for Toledo, Ohio; Sac for Sacramento, and Sandy for San Diego, California.

Clipping is another name for *name cutting*, a universal technique found in this as in other branches of humorous English. Polysyllabic names are often shortened in humorese, Napoleon being called Nap, Disraeli Dizzy, and Schiaparelli Schiap. The basis of many an English limerick is the intercutting pronunciation of English place names like Gloucester (Gloster). Such limericks are essentially spelling or sight gags because they carry no play when recited.

An old couple living in Gloucester
Had a beautiful girl, but they loucester;
 She fell from a yacht,
 And never the spacht
Could be found where the cold waves had toucester.

There was a young coed named Esther
Who was known to most students in Leicester.
 Her looks were so-so,
 But she couldn't say no,
And she thrilled when a boyfriend careicester.

Another prominent technique used in nameplay is *blending*. A person with a mania for punning is a punniac, and by analogy a California booster is a Californiac. A citizen with divided loyalties is a Republicrat, and a certain type of zealous music-lover is called a Beethoventhusiast. By the same device a surname may form part of a blendname, as in the case of Arthur Brisbane, the journalist famous for his editorial writings which critics referred to as Brisbanalities.

Blendings of this sort are found in headings of all kinds—in the titles of publications, like the magazine *Sportfolio*; in the captions of columns, like the Los Angeles *Times'* *Sportraits*; in house names, like *Sherbert* from Sheila and Herbert.

Most prevalent of all is the *brandname blend*, an advertised product whose name serves not to amuse but to arrest the attention of the reader or act as a reminder. Samples: *Nabisco*, from the National Biscuit Company; *Texaco*, from the Texas Company; *Spam*, from shoulder of pork and ham.

The opposite of blending is splitting. Proper names of individuals, like Shakespeare, Washington and Napoleon Bonaparte have often been adapted to charades and other varieties of verbal fission. The most famous instance of *name splitting*, the one that enabled Ulysses and his com-

panions to escape from Polyphemus the Cyclops, throws light upon the esteem in which such wit was held by the ancients.

At least one classic epigram is built on name splitting: Pagan Rome changed her religion by changing Jupiter for Jew Peter.

One of the best-known limericks, generally attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes, fractures the name of one of the best-known American reformers:

Said a great and sensational preacher
To a hen, "You're a beautiful creature."
And the hen, just for that,
Laid an egg in his hat,
And thus did the hen reward Beecher.

Many a story is also a name-splitter. A man phoned a Congressional committee in Washington asking if a certain Mr. Sexauer worked there. When the telephone operator switched him to the chairman's secretary, he repeated, "Do you have a Sexauer over there?" "I should say not," she replied sharply, "we don't even have a ten-minute coffee break any more."

A popular song during the Spanish-American war played variations on the name of Admiral Dewey who commanded the fleet at the capture of Manila:

Oh, dewy was the morning upon the first of May,
And Dewey was the admiral down in Manila Bay,
And dewy were the Spaniards' eyes—those orbs of
black and blue,
And do we feel discouraged? I do not think we do!

Name splitting often turns on *geographical nomenclature*. Two strangers met at a Chicago bar. "My name's Tex," said one. "You from Texas?" asked the other. "No," replied the first. "I come from Louisiana, but who wants to be called Louise?"

Splitting geographical names was once an adult pastime but is now enjoyed only in adolescent circles. Dividing the U.S.A. into feminine states like Mary Land and Ida Ho and the masculine states like Louis Iana and Cal Ifornia is similar to the splitting of city names into Phil Adelphia, Jack Sonville and Al Bany.

Such word-division is on a par with the puerile pastime of creating individuals by going through a dictionary and splitting polysyllabic entries into masculine and feminine names—Ben Evolent and Will Ingness, Ella Gant and Sara Nade.

Nameplay of another sort is found in the whimsical letter where Benjamin Franklin advised his good friend, the Marquis de Lafayette, to name his children after the original American states. "As we cannot have too many of so great a race," wrote the American statesman, "I hope that you and Mme. de Lafayette will go through the 13." Franklin had to admit that, although Virginia, Caroline and Georgia seemed appropriate enough, "Massachusetts and Connecticut are too harsh even for boys unless they were to be savages."

The name of the well-known playwright, Tennessee Williams, seems to indicate that Franklin's witty notion is not quite so whimsical as it must have seemed when he suggested it back in 1782.

In onomastics, the technical term for nameplay, *feminine names* provide much more wit than their masculine counterparts. In and out of season the names of girls are played against the names of months (May, June), the time of day (Eve, Dawn), cities (Charlotte, Myrtle), nouns and verbs (Carol, Sue), and many other things. There was a rash of such comedy in recent years when the U.S. weather bureau started the custom of tagging feminine names onto hurricanes.

Lord Chesterfield once criticized the great Italian humanist in an epigram no less sarcastic than onomastic:

"Petrarch is a sing-song love poet who deserved his Laura better than his laurels."

A young man was out with his sweetheart one evening. "Darling," he whispered, "in the moonlight your teeth are like pearls." "Oh, are they?" was the suspicious answer. "And when were you in the moonlight with Pearl?"

"I didn't mind my husband saying grace at the table," one woman explained, "but I resented his talking about her in his sleep." This recalls an old vaudeville gag. Banker: "We can allow you only three days of grace." Borrower: "Okay, send her around."

On a holiday in Italy a young man wrote his fiancée: "Having wonderful time. Florence is thrilling." She replied: "Don't hurry back. I'm also having a wonderful time—with Harold."

One of the most familiar specimens of feminine name-play is a bit of doggerel:

My Ruth rode on the motorbike
Directly back of me;
I struck a rock at sixty-five
And rode on Ruthlessly.

An enterprising motel-keeper put this brand of comedy to practical use. His motel is near Comfort, Texas, which is situated between the towns of Alice and Louise. He put up a sign which reads: SLEEP IN COMFORT BETWEEN ALICE AND LOUISE.

Typographical errors extend the humor of feminine nomenclature. Pinned on the bulletin-board of an army post was a telegram requesting extension of a furlough, with a clipped-name misprint: "Unable to return to duty stop sick in bed with Flo."

This resembles the typographical error in a Washington, D.C. newspaper that reported a mild indisposition

of President Franklin D. Roosevelt: "President sick in bed with a coed."

With the growing freedom in *naming children*, the stream of comic nomenclature is widening. Girls are being given boys' names and boys girls' names, and almost any common noun is a potential candidate, especially for the femininfant. The census-taker of today is prepared for the most fantastic and bizarre specimens. A Texas millionaire named Hogg is said to have imposed Ima and Ura on his infant daughters.

At a baptism a mother told the clergyman that her daughter's name was Margelet. "You mean Margaret, don't you?" he asked. "No," said the mother, "it's Margelet. Her father first heard the news of her birth by telegram, and Margelet is telegram spelt backwards."

Another story tells about a man who waited impatiently outside a telephone booth while a woman inside was groping through the pages of the directory. After a long ten minutes he opened the door and asked, "May I help you find your number, madam?" "No, thank you," she replied. "I'm just looking for a nice name for my baby."

Sometimes circumstances determine a person's name. A baby boy born in a coach on the Pennsylvania Railroad was called Penrod. A baby girl born during a hurricane was name Gail. And during World War II a set of boy triplets were named Douglas, Mac, Arthur.

At other times problems arise when parents disagree. A young mother told her husband, "I've decided on a name for the baby. We'll call her Jewel." He disliked her choice but was too wise to oppose her. "Wonderful," he exclaimed. "The first girl I ever loved was called Jewel, and the name will bring back fond memories." There was a brief period of silence. Then the wife said firmly, "We'll call her Anne, after my mother."

If singletons are often hard to name, what about *twins*? Oddly enough, this can be less troublesome if they are so named as to indicate their related births. Twin names based on the idea of recurrence may be Max and Climax. The idea of repetition suggests Peter and Repeater. And if the twin infants are girls they may be named Kate and Duplicate.

House names too deserve more than a passing mention here. Although quaint, curious and comic names have been given to homes by their owners for centuries, it was only after World War I with the rapid spread of the summer cottage that the comic house name became an established practice. A humor magazine of the period ran a contest for the cleverest names for summer homes. The prize-winning entries included *The Loaf Nest*, *All Abode*, *Bungle Low*, *All A Loan*, *Too Lodge*.

In addition to signs that play on the owner's surname, house names derive from the owner's trade or profession. One famous author put over the door of his new home: *Writer's Cramp*. A doctor used *Bedside Manor*. A retired mathematics professor called his house *After Math*. The superintendent of schools of a western city used the legend: *Bored of Education*. And a minister who had retired built his first permanent home and christened it *Dun Movin*.

Eventually such nameplay scattered in other directions. Inmates of a state penitentiary refer to it as *The Walled-Off Astoria*. A bird house bears the title: *Home Tweet Home*. The cafeteria for employes of a Smith Brothers' plant is called *The Coughie Shoppe*. And someone even suggested the name for a Florida bell-hop hotel: *Outstretched Palms*.

Currently the most extensive form of this practice is *inn-punning* based on the sound-alikes of *inn* and *in*, the classic specimen being *Dewdrop Inn*. Its earlier use

among tea-shop restaurants has been replaced by motel names. Having driven cross-country many times, I have slept in motels called *Stop Inn*, *Duck Inn*, *Call Inn*, *Come Inn*, *Drive Inn*, *Park Inn*, *Turn Inn*, *Look Inn*, *Motor Inn*, etc.

In days of old, puns pursued their victims beyond this world. Persons with names like Stone, Young, Foote, and the like were buried beneath *tombstones* bearing plays on their names. One of the best-known is or was said to be the simple inscription in an Oswego, New York churchyard: JOHN BURNS.

For the most part these mortuary puns retain the odor of a bygone age when wordplay was not to be groaned at, and tombstones were sometimes more lively than grave. In an Aberdeen churchyard stands another classic marker:

Here lies John Knott.
His father was Knott before him.
He lived Knott, died Knott.
Yet underneath this stone doth lie.
Knott christened, Knott begot.
And here he lies, and still is Knott.

After monumental puns of this kind had been reprinted for generations in jestbooks and periodical literature, they were widely imitated and parodied. The spurious specimens were generally sophisticated or clever, like the well-known Ann Mann:

Here lies Ann Mann
She lived an old woman
But died an old Mann.

Another counterfeit epitaph to which various names are attached but no burial ground:

I was born in the spring,
I died in the fall.
But I won't tell St. Peter
I lived in St. Paul.

Every branch of humorous English evolves by shedding old types and giving birth to new ones. Nameplay is no exception. The passing of the comic epitaph has given way to a number of new species, and the origin of one of these may be worth reporting here.

The scientific nomenclature of birds consists of two or three Latin parts—the generic name, the specific name, and sometimes also the subspecific names. These stand for a bird's distinguishing quality—its anatomical structure or any habit, place or food connected with it. When Englished, some of these scientific names lend a playful flavor to ornithology, as: White-Bellied Booby, Bar-Tailed Godwit, Florida Nuthatch, Natalie's Sapsucker, Virginia Rail.

Thus it came about in 1950, when *Time* magazine ran a serious scientific article on the Bristle-Thighed Curlew, that former editor T. S. Matthews added a whimsical footnote: "Not to be confused with the Tufted Dowager, Red-Eye Crosspatch, All-Night Thrasher, Ruffled Spouse, Great Stench, Lesser Stench, or Double-Breasted Seersucker."

Whereupon Audubon-minded readers freely sent in numerous specimens of *birdplay* of their own creation. Some of these were clever enough to warrant an advertising brochure by the magazine in which each *rara avis* was imaginatively illustrated. Included were The Scarlet Manager, the Electric Crane, the No-Left Tern, the Physical Vulture, the Weekend Bat, the Furtive Scotch Swallow, The Base Canard, the Extra-Marital Lark, the Angostura Bittern, the Buff-Tinted Due-Bill, and the Great Bald Ego.

Since that time advertising has made considerable use of similar birdnames with parodies on ornithological description. Thus, a recent ad pictures a diapered fledgling called the cooing cribcrawler, *Tappa Cana Talcum*, whose native habitat is playpens, high chairs and underfoot. . . . Then follows the tie-in with copy on the advertised product.

The spread of this brand of nameplay soon lured other members of the animal kingdom. One of these was the *fishname*. Unlike the proverbial epithets through which we stigmatize a person by calling him a queer fish, a poor fish or a slippery eel, this new species of fishplay caricatured individuals through the use of ichthyological nomenclature.

An advertising agency issued a pictorial calendar based on this piscatorial device. Each month was devoted to a different species of advertising executive.

The Night-Flying Fish swims merrily about in the firm's liquid assets, and makes quite a large splash at swanky bars and exclusive clubs.

The Affirmative Grunt is urgently sought by all salesmen angling for new business with a dotted line.

Before winding up these observations on this neglected branch of humorous English, I submit a dialogue to show the way names are multiplying in every direction. "Farm products," complained a customer to a farmer, "cost much more than they used to." "Of course they do," agreed the farmer. "When a farmer has to know the botanical name of what he is raising, and the zoological name of the insect that eats it, and the chemical name of what will kill the insect, somebody's got to pay."

QUESTIONABLE ENGLISH

We come now to another class of linguistics that asks more questions than any questionnaire or inquisitive child. All through life we toy with questions, from the riddles of childhood until we pass into the final unanswerable question mark.

Bernard Shaw once observed that no question is so difficult to answer as that to which the answer is obvious. This remark may aptly be applied to the simplest of comic questions, the so-called *questionism*, an epigram expressed in the form of a rhetorical question.

Why is it that the wrong number on a telephone is never busy?

Why go South for the winter when you have lots of winter where you are?

Such *interrogative epigrams* are less often a matter of nonsense than satire.

Where do mothers learn all the things they tell their daughters not to do?

How can we expect our children to get an education in college if they can't find a place to park their cars?

In the classification of comedy there are many types of *rhetorical questions*. Most of these take no answers but are asked merely for comic effect.

Before money was invented, what did women find attractive about men?

Another type parallels the age-old query about the precedence of the chicken or the egg.

Which came first, the caterpillar or the butterfly?

The *occupational question* is a rhetorical one whose wit lies in the symbol or association attached to trades and professions.

When a sick florist goes to the hospital, what do you send him?

Who tells a bus conductor where to get off?

There is one type, however, which asks for no answer yet inevitably receives one.

A grateful patient said to her doctor, "How can I ever repay you for what you've done?" The doctor replied, "By cash, check or money-order."

A girl turned indignantly on her escort. "See here!" she cried. "Who said you could kiss me?" "Well," he answered hesitantly, "if you must know, just about everyone."

Another young man had another approach. He was trying hard, but seemed unable to make much headway with a pretty girl. "What dainty hands!" he murmured. "And what lovely lips you have, and what beautiful eyes! Where did you get those eyes?" "Oh," replied the girl nonchalantly, "they came with the head."

All sorts of situations call for rhetorical questions, and many of them provoke uncalled-for answers. The chaplain of a mental institution had a distressing experience of this kind. Once, in an excess of religious fervor, he asked his congregation, "Why are we all here?"—only to

receive the unexpected reply, "Because we are not all there."

A GI appeared before the company officer charged with using insulting language to his sergeant. "Sir," he protested, "I was merely answering a question." "What question?" snapped the officer. "Well, sir, the sergeant said 'Who do you think I am?', and I told him."

Unlike these rhetorical answer-backs is the *hypothetical question*, a query which assumes a condition or hypothesis. Gogol has a character who is always trying to find the answer to the hypothetical question, "If elephants laid eggs, what color would the eggs be?"

Satire finds this iffy question an easy means of spoofing conventional ideas which are more trite than right.

If all women are alike, why should any man commit bigamy?

If exercise eliminates fat, how does a woman get a double chin?

If a cluttered desk is the sign of a cluttered mind, what is the significance of an empty desk?

Other languages as well as English levitate toward the "*question questioned*," a form of repartee in which one question answers another. The traditional gag poses the problem and then proves it.

Q. Don't you hate people who answer a question with another? A. Who doesn't?

Such gags are of a various nature. A girl asks her presumptuous escort, "Don't you know what good clean fun is?" He replies, "No, what good is it?"

Jocular situations are also built upon the questioned question. An impatient dowager was vexed because the hotel elevator was slow in arriving after she had pushed

the button. "Where have you been?" she snapped at the operator. "Where can you go in an elevator?" returned the perplexed employee.

A personnel manager was interviewing a young man seeking a job. "Tell me," he said, "what have you done?" "Me?" replied the startled applicant. "About what?"

A candidate for sheriff called on a minister to request his support at the coming election. "Before I decide," said the minister, "I'd like to ask you a question." "Okay," agreed the candidate. "Do you partake of intoxicating beverages?" inquired the clergyman. "Before I reply, I'd like to ask you a question," countered the would-be sheriff. "Is this an inquiry or an invitation?"

This last specimen also serves as a *rhetorical alternative*, a query in which two persons or ideas differing in some way are cleverly co-ordinated by the particle *or*. Many a wisecrack belongs to such brittle wit, like Ed Wynn's "Are you single or worried?" Or the equally familiar, "Are you a success or do you still lie to your wife?"

The wit of such questions is often more ingenious and more incisive.

When a man says he's a self-made man, is he boasting or apologizing?

Did nature create man to show that she is big enough to make mistakes, or was it pure ignorance?

Despite its name, the rhetorical alternative is not always rhetorical but may illustrate any kind of choice. A sorority girl asked another, "Whom shall I date this weekend—the Lincoln or the Cadillac?"

Another choice is present in the question coupling two persons of a kind.

When two chatterboxes get together, which one listens?

When one woman argues with another, who gets the last word?

Whose funeral parlor does he use when an undertaker buries another undertaker?

A popular interrogative also omitted from textbooks on English is the *punchline question*. This is the punchline of a story and is asked merely for jocular or climactic effect.

A father was upbraiding his teenage daughter for her laziness, and then turned upon her slovenly appearance. "And your hair too," he cried in anger, "it looks like a mop." "What's a mop?" interrupted the girl.

A man went to see an analyst and told him that he was losing his memory. "How long has this been going on?" inquired the analyst. "How long has what been going on?" asked the patient.

A fortuneteller collected \$25 for a reading and told her visitor, "This entitles you to two questions." "Isn't that a lot of money for only two questions?" asked the sitter in surprise. "Yes, madam, it is," replied the fortuneteller solemnly. "And now what is your second question?"

Another tale set in similar surroundings ends in a punchline question somewhat Freudian. A woman sought the advice of a fortuneteller who prophesied, "Prepare yourself for widowhood. Your husband is about to die a violent death." The wife let out a long sigh, and then asked, "Will I be acquitted?"

A man who entered a hospital for a physical checkup was given a private room and told to undress. No sooner had he removed his outer clothing than there came a knock at the door. "Come in," he called. A woman in white entered. "I'm the doctor," she said. "Will you

please undress completely." He finished undressing at once, and then was given a thorough examination. "You can now put on your pajamas and get into bed," she said at last. "Is there anything you'd like to know?" "Yes," he said. "Why did you knock?"

A long step separates the punchline from the *punning question* though both are fertile members of the family of interrogatives.

The question of the hour: What time is it?

Have you noticed that a knocker is always outside the door?

In the race for a husband, how can a girl tell when she is on the last lap?

The *self-interrogative* is an unusual type of punning question in which an interrogative pronoun or phrase turns out to be a self-answering pun.

Why is the Fourth of July?

What was the name of the inventor of the steam engine?

The inventor of the sewing machine is called how?

Which craft was persecuted by the Puritans of New England?

The most recent addition to the family of questions takes the form of a quoted caption appearing under a gag cartoon or humor panel. This is the *interrogative gagline*, a query made by a cartoon character, usually to another rather than to a group. One of the best-known specimens appeared under a James Thurber cartoon in the *New Yorker* magazine: "Well, if I called the wrong number, why did you answer the phone?"

One worker to another: "I'm new here. Whom do I have to see about a raise?"

Psychiatrist to patient: "When did you first discover that you enjoyed paying your income tax?"

Among the tricks familiar to proverb-twisters is adding a question to a short proverb, thereby giving it a deft, rhetorical turn.

Money isn't everything, but what isn't it?

Hard work never killed anyone, but why take a chance on being its first victim?

A fool and his money are soon parted, but how did they get together in the first place?

The *fool's query* cannot be ignored in any discussion of comic questions. The simplest type exemplifies a simpleton who asks a simple question. This query takes no answer, probably on the proverbial basis that the greatest fool can ask questions which the wisest man cannot answer. The naive wife of the mayor of a large seaport at her first ship launching asked, "How hard do I have to strike it to knock it into the water?"

The ranger naturalists of our national parks are asked more foolish questions in one short summer than other people are asked in a long lifetime. A tourist in Yellowstone, impressed by the constantly spouting geyser, asked one of these guides, "Do you keep Old Faithful running in the winter?"

Another type illustrates the proverbial foolish-question, foolish-answer routine in which the reply tries to outdo the query in absurdity. A woman was inspecting a silver fox farm. After admiring a beautiful specimen, she asked her guide, "Just how many times can a fox be skinned for his fur?" The guide looked at her quizzically for a moment, then said, "Three times, madam. Any more than that would arouse his temper."

A third type is the embarrassing query of a fool which

usually calls forth an unkind answer in kind. A little old lady turned to the train conductor and asked, "Is smoking permitted in this coach?" "No, ma'am," replied the conductor. "Then where did all those cigarette butts come from?" she persisted. "From passengers, ma'am," said the conductor gravely, "who didn't ask questions."

The opposite of the fool's query is the *wit's query* which also includes a variety of types. Sometimes one question is framed within another.

Who is it that said, he who asks a question is a fool for a minute, but he who never asks a question is a fool forever?

A century ago the level of popular comedy was so low that the wit's query of that period seems like the fool's query of today. This is especially true of the *metaphorical question* in which the literal element of a metaphor was crossed or mixed with the figurative meaning:

Have you ever seen a hair from the head of a hammer? A toe from the foot of a mountain? A wink from the eye of a needle? A bite from the teeth of a saw? A page from a volume of steam? A sheet from the bed of a river?

Somewhat above this level was the literalism turned into an *interrogative idiom*.

Where does a man go when he wants to get away from himself?

Does the woman who is driven to distraction have to walk back?

Contemporary types, like the *interrogative reverse* in which a familiar idea or expression turns on a contrary note, will probably seem equally naïve a century hence.

What do frogs get in their throats when they become hoarse?

What do bats have in the belfry when they get crazy notions?

What do butterflies get in their stomachs when they are nervous?

If the variety of comic questions is best shown by illustrating different types, their frequency is best shown by illustrating different themes. Love, marriage, money, politics and other subjects of timeless interest are perpetually adding to our store of questionable English. Hell is about as good a subject as any other to point out this fact.

How do you know that this life isn't another world's hell?

If the sun is too hot to be inhabited, how about hell?

Where do people in hell tell one another to go?

The same rule applies to stories in jocular literature which achieve their effects by questions outside the types I have already described.

A man dining in a restaurant had not been served potatoes with his entree. He thought he might try out his French on the cute waitress. "Where's the pommes de terres?" he asked. Without giving his question a second thought, she answered, "First door around that corner to the right."

Adults generally tend to overlook the value of questions as a comic weapon of self-defense against the ceaseless questioning of children. For years I have used one which has stood me in good stead with all kinds of youngsters:

If husbands become fathers when they have children, what do children become when they have fathers?

STYLE

All great humorists swim in the stream of their individual styles. But there are streams of writing, especially occupational jargons, which always threaten to drown the individual without style who swims in them. The suffix *-ese* is the favorite combining form used to represent these different modes of writing. Each of these contributes to the comedy of English, sometimes by design but more often by parody.

The jargon of *medicalese* is a disease for which there is no cure outside of humor. A sudden encounter with a door, for example, often results in "oculosis of the conjunctive tissues and the periorbital cuticular tissues." Translated into English this means simply a black eye.

A young man, called up for military service, wrote his draft board asking for deferment because he was "convalescing from a traumatic perisynovitis of the flexor digitorum sublimus in profundis muscle at the metacarpophalangeal joint." The army said no. A sore finger wasn't a good enough excuse.

Legalese is an even worse disease though it sometimes leads to merely simple misunderstandings. A lawyer had occasion to dictate a document to a stenographer unaccustomed to legal phraseology. His "Know All Men By These Presents" came back to him typewritten as "No Old Men Buy These Presents."

But more often legalese is parodied in expressions piling qualifications on modifications and heaping restrictions on top of these. Even old Rabelais used this device when he satirized legalese in the nonsensical dispute between Kissbreech and Suckfist.

If a friend were to give you an orange, he'd simply say, "Here is an orange." But if he were recording the transaction in legalese, he'd probably put it this way: "I hereby give and convey to you, all and singular, my estate and interest, rights, title, claim and advantages of and in said orange, together with all its rind, juice, pulp and pits and all rights and advantages with full power to bite, cut, and otherwise eat the same, or give the same away with and without the rind, skin, juice, pulp or pits, anything herein before or herein after or in any other deed, or deeds, instruments of whatever nature or kind whatsoever to the contrary in anywise notwithstanding."

Humorese is something else again. It stands for the stylistic tricks of the professional humorist who resorts to every comic technique, from elementary slang to pedantic irony. It ridicules big words and little, too many words and too few, cryptic speech and clichés, and other opposing forms of expression. It reaps as ready a harvest from the monosyllabic extreme of telegraphese as from the polysyllabic extreme of officialese.

Figurative English is a stock device of humorese. As we have already noted in the chapter on *Idiomatics*, figures of speech are not words like *to*, *for* and *ate* which belong more to figures than to the figurative. They are expressions in which words are used in unusual senses to give striking effects to ideas. They set off the color and comedy and rhythm of words in non-literal ways, turning language into vivid vitality.

Commonest of all figures is the *metaphor*. This is an implied comparison in which a word or phrase is applied

to another to suggest a likeness between them. We use metaphors when we refer to the rain typing on the roof, or the wind autographing the sand dunes, or a woodpecker riveting the trees.

Oddly enough, these figurative techniques which enrich humorous English bear the most forbidding names. Most of them are of Greek nomenclature, like synecdoche, meiosis, hyperbaton, catachresis, prolepsis, brachylogy. Though these names put us off, their means may be as amusing as their looks are disagreeable.

Poetry has always been the chosen field of descriptive writing to help the mind form pictures appealing to the five senses. But poets have no monopoly on *imagery*. Humorists often rush in where poets fear to tread. In such cases the sensory wit is usually a matter of prose rather than verse.

Observe how men of letters inject wit into figurative language:

Jonathan Swift: She wears her clothes as if they were thrown on her with a pitchfork.

Charles Dickens: She italicizes the word by putting one of her dimples under it.

George Meredith: She poured a little social sewerage into his ears.

Instead of describing the fall coloring in terms of reds and scarlets, the humorous imagist remarks that Mother Nature always blushes before disrobing. He is especially fond of clothing his imagination in epigrams.

Happiness sneaks in through a door you didn't know you left open.

When virtue hides her face it is called modesty; when vice does likewise it is called shame.

Another mold in which the humorous imagist pours his wit is the definition. Here too abstract ideas like time and love are the natural foil for smiling figures.

Time is but a freckle on the face of eternity.

Patience is the camel's back waiting for the last straw.

Love is a season pass on the shuttle between heaven and hell.

Climax is a fairly common trick employed in humor. A young man, an only son, married against the wishes of his parents. A short time afterwards, telling a friend how to break the news to them, he said, "Tell them first that I'm dead. And then gently work up to a climax."

This jest was switched to a story of Samuel Goldwyn who was once giving his scriptwriters a pep talk. He insisted on a super-colossal picture, he told them, something out of this world. One of the scenarists asked Goldwyn if he had any suggestions. "Sure," he said, "start out with an earthquake, and then work up to a climax."

The comedy of climax does not usually deal with the subject of climax but follows a definite pattern. It builds up an arrangement of ideas in an order of increasing value, often with a twisted finale. A small-town congregation decided to raise their pastor's salary from \$3000 to \$3500. But the good man wouldn't hear of it. "I object to your decision on three grounds," he explained. "First, because you can't afford to give me more than \$3000. Second, because my preaching is not worth more than \$3000. And third, because the added task of trying to collect an extra \$500 from you would probably kill me."

A similar story climaxes a case of mistaken identity. A pretty girl bounded into a doctor's office and said loudly, "Doctor, I want you to tell me what's wrong with me." As she proceeded to undress, he surveyed her care-

fully from head to foot. "I've just three things to tell you," he said at last. "First, your weight should be increased by at least twenty pounds. Second, you should change to a different shade of rouge and lipstick. And third, I'm an artist. The doctor has his office next door."

The classic example of *anticlimax* in English literature is De Quincey's explanation of what murder can lead to: "If once a man indulges in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he next comes to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination."

This series of ideas in descending order of importance illustrates one of the two types of anticlimax. The other is the quick descent contrasting with a previous rise of emotions, as in Bernard Shaw's description of his behavior during danger: "In moments of utter crises my nerves act in the most extraordinary way. When utter disaster seems imminent, my whole being is simultaneously braced to avoid it. I size up the situation in a flash, set my teeth, contract my muscles, take a firm grip of myself, and without a tremor, always do the wrong thing."

The De Quincey type is personified in the man who never chases women because he is too moral, too decent, too old. It is also exemplified in the words of a proud Southerner who had attended a banquet and was afterwards asked who had been present. He replied: "An elegant gentleman from Virginia, a gentleman from Kentucky, a man from Ohio, a fellow from New York, a bounder from Boston, and a punk from Maine."

The Shavian type based on the sudden reversal of roused expectancy is illustrated in the case of the sweet young thing who tearfully told her girlfriend: "Not only has he broken my heart and wrecked my life, but he's ruined my whole evening."

Her counterpart was the young man who complained,

"I've got a headache, my heart has palpitations, my nerves are shot, my ulcer is worse than ever—and I don't feel well."

Bathos like anticlimax follows two paths: a false or strained pathos, or the sublime-to-the-ridiculous course. The former is represented in Goldsmith's *On the Death of a Favorite Cat*, the latter in Swift's account of the origin of the Lilliput-Blefescu war in *Gulliver's Travels*.

Many a funny story involves the ludicrous descent from lofty thoughts to lowly ones. A young mother entered the nursery one night and was surprised to see her husband standing at the baby's crib. She watched him in silence as he looked down at the sleeping infant. In his face she could read the emotions of admiration, exaltation and wonder. Touched at this unusual paternal attitude, she gently slipped her arm round him. "A penny for your thoughts," she said tenderly. Startled, he exclaimed, "I can't understand it. How on earth can any manufacturer make a crib like this for \$5.95?"

A story built upon the sudden plunge from the elevated to the commonplace tells about a starry-eyed girl who was taken to a bar by a man she had just met. "What will you have," he asked her, "champagne or beer?" She replied, "I prefer champagne. When I drink it I get bubbly all over. I imagine myself far away on some mid-ocean beach. I dream that I am lying alone nude on the soft, warm sands. Then I see a tall, handsome man walking towards me from the distance. When he reaches me, he kneels down and gazes lovingly into my eyes. Then he smiles and rises, goes into the sea, and returns with two huge shells filled with beautiful pearls. He pours them over my quivering body, and I feel bubbly all over, a divine sensation. But when I drink beer, I burp."

An enemy of officialese or government jargon once pointed out that Lincoln's Gettysburg Address contains

only 266 words, the Ten Commandments only 297 words, the Genesis story of the Creation only 400 words, the Declaration of Independence only 1,321 words, but the government uses over 2,500 words to announce a reduction in the price of cabbage seeds.

Brevity of course plays a various role in English, and a number of rhetorical and grammatical types, like syncope, syllepsis and zeugma, show that it is often the goal as well as the soul of wit. One favorite trick is to shorten verbosity. "For the love of Pete, be brief," wrote an exasperated railway superintendent to a maintenance-of-way man whose reports on trivial incidents ran to several pages. The reprimanded worker complied. His next report described the damage done by a cloudburst. "Dear Sir: Where the railroad was, the river is."

A similar story tells about the foreman of a logging camp which employed a hundred men and a couple of women cooks. The foreman had been very wordy in his reports to the management so that finally an executive wrote him: "We haven't time to read page after page of details. Boil it down. Give us the picture in percentages. That's all that really matters." In his next account the foreman obliged. "Last month," he reported, "1% of the men married 50% of the women."

Dialogue is sometimes the briefest form of brevity, with the words covering much more ground than they occupy. A debtor on the witness stand cried, "As God is my judge, I do not owe the money." The judge replied, "He is not. I am. You do."

Another colloquy occurred between a prodigal son and his father, a busy tycoon to whose office the spendthrift had gone. Father: "I'm busy. Be short." Son: "I will. I am."

An even briefer dialogue took place between two reticent lovers. When he proposed he just held up a

diamond ring and said: "Eh?", and she looked at it and said, "Uh-huh."

The immortal enemy of brevity is *circumlocution* by which things are expressed in a roundabout way. It leads you to say "the husband of my mother's sister" when you mean "my uncle." It resorts to many words for ideas that can be put into a few.

The *roundabout epigram* best typifies this figure of speech. It expresses the relations of people in an amusingly indirect way.

Many a man is proud of his father and mother because they are the parents of such a wonderful person.

The point of view of the roundabout epigram generally centers around a husband, the wife being the indispensable person who makes the round trip possible.

A married man's best friend is his wife's husband.

Many a conceited man will compliment his wife by praising her husband.

Many a man's ambition is to marry a rich girl who is too proud to have her husband work.

In funny stories such periphrasis follows another pattern. It tries to get around unpleasant explanations. The usual situations involve the attempts of adults to avoid conveying the facts of life to their youngsters. One such tale describes parents who found it embarrassing to tell their young son about the coming of a second child. Finally, when it could be postponed no longer, the uneasy father summoned up his courage and said, "Son, I've noticed a great big stork circling the house. It flies around and around, its big wings flapping—" "Gee!" interrupted the little fellow, "I hope mom doesn't see it. It's dangerous if she gets a bad scare now when she's pregnant."

Closely related to roundabout English is the *euphemism*. This is an indirect expression for a harsh word, a mild substitute for unpleasantly forthright terms, like referring to the world's oldest profession when we mean prostitution.

Euphemisms are natural targets in comedy, as in the familiar complaint of the lad who was always getting the part of the fowl that goes over the fence last. The most favored euphemisms are substitutes for hell. One man complained: "Hades is the polite word for hell, but there is no polite word for heaven."

Fred Allen, bedeviled by censorship, once said, "All heck may break loose over the air, but not hell, because the network censor does not acknowledge the existence of hell."

During World War II our generals always hid behind the term *planned withdrawal* for retreat. General Jonathan Wainwright refused to be a party to such a practice, and described one military reverse in unmistakable language: "We took a hell of a beating."

A clever euphemistic verse was the refusal of a girl who disliked her suitor:

"Go to father," she said, when he asked her to wed,
And she knew that he knew that her father was dead,
And she knew that he knew the life father had led,
And she knew that he knew what she meant when she said,
"Go to father."

Exaggeration, or what grammarians call hyperbole, is far more basic and extensive in humorous writing than the euphemism. Most comedy is clothed in it, from satire to nonsense, and from the simple exaggerism which is one sentence short to the yarn which is spun out through several long pages.

Ages before there existed literary or even popular humor, folk humor was colored by such extravagance.

What can be more overstated than the flight of a modern wing-footed Mercury in the folksong?

A man in Georgia pulled a gun
An' took a shot at me.
Jes' as he took the second shot
I passed through Tennessee.

Another tidbit from folklore tells about a Southern gentleman, noted for his love of strong coffee, who visited New Orleans and dined in one of its famous restaurants. He took one sip of his coffee, called the waiter, and cried: "What do you call this stuff?" "Coffee," politely replied the waiter. "Coffee!" exclaimed the high-strung Southerner. "Why, I could put a coffee bean in my mouth, dive into the Mississippi from the end of this street, swim all the way up to Memphis, and I'll guarantee that you could bail up much stronger coffee than this along the entire route."

Understatement is the opposite of exaggeration, but far less adaptable and inclusive. British humor is a matter of understatement, so the cliché runs, whereas the laughing matter of America is overstatement. This half-truth and semi-falsehood lie behind the comic stereotypes of both countries. To Americans the comic Englishman is always too moderate in speech and action, and to Britons the comic American is the reverse. Yet the humorous literature of both lands, beginning with Shakespeare's Falstaff, proves that both techniques are the common heritage of both peoples.

It was an English barber who, upon cutting a customer's face, remarked, "I guess I must have shaved that spot too close." Similarly, an American farmer, when asked how his potato crop turned out, said, "Fine. Some are as big as marbles, some as big as peas, and of course there are a few little ones."

Looking up at the 102-story Empire State Building in New York City, an Englishman observed, "Gives an impression of height, doesn't it?" Likewise, when asked how her husband was, an American woman explained, "I haven't seen him for five years. I guess I must have said something to annoy him."

American humor on all levels—literary, popular and folk—overindulges in understatement. An atomic scientist was describing the terrifying power of nuclear fission to a girl he had met at a party. "Good Heavens!" she exclaimed in wide-eyed wonder. "You scientists ought to be mighty careful handling that stuff. It's dynamite."

This anticlimactic effect often underlies understatement. At a story conference a writer was reviewing a television serial he had written. "Now at this point," he simplified, "Mother needs an operation, Uncle goes to jail, the baby is kidnapped, and Father disappears. Then suddenly disaster strikes!"

Far removed from exaggeration and understatement is the unintentional humor of journalistic writing. A cub reporter was assigned to cover the annual play of the local high school. "The auditorium," he wrote, "was filled with expectant mothers eagerly awaiting the appearance of their offspring."

Such ambiguity characterizes the *journalese* found in many newspapers as well as house organs, trade papers, and kindred journals. This style or lack of style is also marked by hasty expressions (He shot the girl he was engaged to's brother), redundancy (The man was fatally killed), lazy composition (The prisoners were in charge of Sheriff Smith), and long lists of trite expressions cited by professors of journalism.

One feature of *journalese* is the *anatomical*, described

in the chapter on *Ambiguity*. This type of expression does not refer to a person's anatomy but seems to.

Mrs. H—, in attempting to get out of the car, fell to the pavement, injuring her somewhat.

The operator of the other car, charged with drunken driving, crashed into Miss B—'s rear end which was sticking out into the road.

The *bonehead* or headline boner is another prominent feature of journalese which, due to the necessity for columnar compression, provides endless specimens of double entendre.

Miss West Virginia Is Hit With Rotary Club
Bird Lovers To Hear Bald Eagle Lecture

Local Mattress Factory Plays Important Role in City's
Growth

If contraction often makes journalese ambiguous, expansion does the same for *officialese*. This is the turgid prose used by officials everywhere, a form of English in an advanced state of decomposition. Though criticized in books, parodied by Washington correspondents, and ridiculed by teachers of English, *officialese* goes on its bombastic way heedless and mindless—especially mindless.

Maury Maverick, a Congressman from Texas, coined the word *gobbledygook* to describe it. Another word, *bafflegab*, was later coined by a counsel for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. No less original was the youngster who couldn't understand *officialese* and said simply, "It reads just like scribble to me."

A classic story tells about a plumber who wrote to the Bureau of Standards at Washington that he had found hydrochloric acid good for cleaning clogged drains. The

Bureau wrote back: "The efficacy of hydrochloric acid is indisputable, but the corrosive residue is incompatible with metallic permanence." The plumber replied that he was glad they found he was right. The Bureau then sent another letter: "We cannot assume responsibility for the production of toxic and noxious residues from hydrochloric acid, and suggest you utilize an alternative procedure." The plumber was pleased with this letter too and replied that he was glad they still agreed. Whereupon the Bureau sent a third letter: "Don't use hydrochloric acid! It eats hell out of pipes!"

Another example out of the endless stream of official-ese reveals an affinity to legalese. Forbidding its personnel to hitchhike, the Washington Naval Command Englished it thus: "Effective immediately, the practice of endeavoring by words, gestures, or otherwise to beg, invite, or secure transportation in any motor vehicle not engaged in passenger carrying for hire, or otherwise acting as a commercial passenger carrier, by officers and/or enlisted men or women of the naval service at any point within the boundaries of the Washington Naval Command is forbidden."

Scientific writing too is a complex and ambiguous language having nothing in common with English except the alphabet. Inevitably it invites ridicule and parody because its big words of precise meaning bear no resemblance whatever to the short words of general meaning used in everyday speech.

One man said to another: "I bought a wonderful machine yesterday. By means of a pedal attachment, a fulcrum lever converts a vertical reciprocal motion into a circular movement. The principal part of the machine is a huge disc that revolves in a vertical plane. Power is applied through the axis of the disc, and work is done on the periphery where the hardest metals by mere impact

may be reduced to any shape." "That's wonderful," cried his friend. "What do you call this machine?" The other replied, "A grindstone."

Another variety of technical English is *shoptalk*, the specialized or colloquial vocabularies of various trades and professions, like legalese and medicalese already mentioned. An old salt poked fun at an inexperienced seaman: "Listen, landlubber, if the captain ever heard you calling that deck a floor, he'd throw you right out of one of those little round windows."

Then there was the woman who, unfamiliar with railway lingo, was standing near a depot while a freight train was being made up. As the train backed up, one of the brakemen called to another: "Jump on her, Bill, when she comes by, cut her in two, and send the head end to the depot." The woman ran away as fast as she could, screaming for the police.

Such shoptalk is a long way from the remark of one nuclear physicist to another as a glamorous creature passed by: "Now there's an arrangement of molecules for you!"

The history of humorous writing discloses everchanging trends. Our fast-paced modern living is too impatient for the lengthy light verse and the leisurely essays of our forefathers. These have given way to shorter forms, broader spoofing, with greater stress on topical matters. With the disappearance of popular poetry, parody has turned to prose, except in juvenile humor, and in its stead we playfully tease *advertese*. Similarly, with the disappearance of our literary periodicals, some of the liveliest writing is found in our daily journals. The graphic and fluid prose of many a sports columnist is especially inimitable and, to coin a paradox, well worth copying.

NUMERICAL ENGLISH

"Certainly," replied Picasso when asked if he believed in miracles. "I've painted 5,000 pictures and there are 10,000 in existence. Isn't that a miracle?"

Comedian Joe E. Lewis claims he shoots golf in the low 70's. "When it gets any colder," he says, "I quit!"

A huge hulk of a man entered a crowded restaurant and asked, "Have you a table for two for one?"

Gags like these are classified under numerical English, the branch of humor dealing with numbers.

Numerical spelling is one species of such humor. It is a form of numerese in which numerals are used in spelling out words, like 2t for toot, collegi8 for collegiate, and so 4th. This was one of the novelties in Artemus Ward's bag of tricks, like there4 and 4get, h8 and K8.

Josh Billings too spelled arithmetically, as when he wrote that a mother's heart gives 4th joy at her baby's 1st 2th. In the same vein Edward Lear, the rhyming non-sensifier, used to write his friend's name Fortescue, 40scue.

It is impossible to form complete sentences in numerical English without the addition of words. The most familiar wall sign in shops a generation and more ago read: *If U Don't See What U Want, Ask 4 It*. Another favorite was the symbolic combination of numbers and letters in a mock epitaph:

Here lie the remains of Henry Low,
With us he is no more;
For what he thought was H_2O
Was H_2SO_4 .

Less caustic but no less cautionary was the license plate observed on a hearse. It read simply: U2. The same combination was the name of an American plane shot down over Russia in 1960 which made history—and many a topical witticism.

During the early 1900s the vogue of *simplified spelling* swept over the country like a prairie fire. A widely reprinted story of the period told about a man who had stopped another at the entrance to a new post-office building. "Excuse me, sir," he asked, "can you tell me what those letters mean—MDCCCXCVIII?" "They mean the year 1898," explained the other. The first man shook his head in puzzlement. "It seems to me they're carrying simplified spelling too far."

In recent years Roman numbers have served as a comic substitute for their Arabic equivalents. A gagline under the cartoon of a Roman insomniac who is counting sheep, reads: "XXXXIII, XXXXIV, XXXXV, XXXXVI. . . ."

No special spelling is required to add cleverness to the *numerical saying*. This is the witticism whose point depends upon numbers, fractions, quantities or similar arithmetical relations.

A quartet is made up of four people who think the other three can't sing.

If a man doesn't make a fool of himself over a woman before he's 30, he's fairly safe until he's 60.

Epigrams of this kind are sometimes expressed in the form of numerical sequences, usually a one-two-three order.

A kiss is not enough for one, just enough for two, and too much for three.

During inflation the one-dollar lunch you have been paying two dollars for goes up to three dollars.

Henry Adams, the American historian, once wrote: "One friend in a lifetime is much, two are many, three are hardly possible."

James Thurber added a dash of bitters in discussing martinis: "One is all right, two is too many, three is not enough."

Sometimes the *numerical chain* follows a descending series.

In school we learn the rule of three, in courtship the rule of two, and in marriage the rule of one.

The three balls in front of a pawnshop mean two to one you won't get it back.

Such sequences may also be expressed by ordinal numbers. Somerset Maugham once said: "The first duty of a woman is to be pretty, the second is to be well-dressed, and the third is never to contradict."

The most repeated comparison in numerical English is between *one* and *two*. It starts in childhood with riddles.

Q. What ties two people but touches only one? A. A wedding ring.

Nimble-minded wits seem to be forever engaged in this numbers game.

One yawn usually makes two yawners.

When two men in a business always agree, one of them is unnecessary.

Another case where two equals one is the split personality.

A classified ad which first appeared in a London newspaper in 1825 has become a classic bull: "Wanted by a surgeon residing at Guildford, two apprentices who will be treated as one of the family."

Lewis Carroll used the pronoun *one* to counterpoint this lowest of cardinal numbers. When Alice says to Humpty Dumpty, "One can't help growing older," he replies, "One can't, perhaps, but two can."

More personal was Samuel Butler's counterpoint of view: "Two are better than one," he admitted, "but the man who said that did not know my sisters."

Definitions commonly play *one* against *two*, both with persons and things.

umbrella. A shelter for one but a shower for two.

marriage. The association of two persons for the benefit of one.

misogynist. A man who thinks that one tongue is enough for two women.

These numbers are also found in *numerical compounds*, usually set off in antithesis.

There are getting to be more and more one-way streets and two-way marriages.

Sometimes this couple is also put in double harness, a form of double play.

Children leave their parents one by one, usually to return two by two.

Kipling gave us another version in verse:

The sins ye do by two and two
Ye must pay for one by one.

Proverbs are also built upon the antithesis of these numbers, like the proverbial value of killing two birds with one stone.

When one is wise, two are happy.

Better reap two days too soon than one day too late.

The more familiar *numerical proverbs* are constantly being converted into satiric sayings.

Two can live as cheaply as one can gamble.

Two can live as cheaply as one—on parents.

The only two who can live as cheaply as one are a dog and a flea.

Wordplayers find it equally easy to turn the two heads that are better than one.

Two heads are better than one, especially in a barber shop.

Two heads are better than one, but not when they are soreheads.

Two heads are better than one, unless you have a hang-over.

Proverb-twisters delight in other numerical counterpoint. It takes two to make a quarrel or a bargain, but any number may play against it.

It takes two to make a quarrel, and three to make it interesting.

It takes two to make a bargain, but only one gets it.

It takes two to make a quarrel, and the same number to get married.

The variety of numerical proverbs provides an abundance of twist-wit.

In the Garden of Eden, two were company and three a crowd.

It takes three generations of thrift to make a spend-thrift.

There's safety in numbers, especially when the numbers are seven and eleven.

The ordinal counterparts of *one* and *two*—*first* and *second*—also spark all kinds of quips, quotes and comicalities, like the flirt who often gets to first base with a man only to find his wife on second.

The first rule of public speaking is to speak up, the second is to sit down.

Victor Hugo once quipped that "Waterloo was a battle of the first rank won by a captain of the second."

One of the questions in an American history exam ran: "Who was the second First Lady of the land?"

Compound terms like first-class, second-hand, and the like make up much of such wit. Ben Franklin's old saw that "rich widows are the only second-hand goods sold at first-class prices" (this was said in colonial days before the market in antiques) matches such modern instances as the second violinist who considers himself a first-class player, and the package that arrives by first-class mail in second-class condition.

Many kinds of firsts are adroitly balanced by seconds. One of these sets the first against the second half.

The first half of our lives is ruined by our parents, and the second half by our children.

Another and more derisive opposition balances first and second husbands, with widows suffering most of the ridicule. An old Scottish proverb warns: "Never become the second husband of a widow unless her first husband was hanged."

A woman gets over her first husband's death but her second husband doesn't.

Most men would rather be the second husband of a widow than her first.

A widow expects her second husband to live up to the sentiments expressed on the tombstone of her first.

Not far behind such domestic relations runs the contrast of first and second wives.

When a man makes a mistake in his first marriage, the victim is his second wife.

A fortune-hunter owes his success to his first wife, and his second wife to his success.

A man was unlucky in both his marriages. His first wife ran away with another man, and his second wife didn't.

As with *one* and *two*, and *first* and *second*, so with the antithesis *once* and *twice*. It is found in proverbial wit and wisdom, sometimes framed in rhyme, though unlike *once burnt, twice shy*, the proverbs are not familiar enough to warrant twisting.

Once a favor, twice a rule.

Once an event, twice a precedent.

Wit once bought is worth twice taught.

Another rich class of numerical English is devoted to *number punning*. *One*, the lowest of cardinal numbers, provides the highest number of such puns.

"Oh, well," said the uncomplaining college student as he surveyed the wreck. "I always said I would have a motorcycle one day, and now I've had a motorcycle one day."

Its homonym *won* is often substituted for the number *one* or played against it.

A bet is something that can be lost in more ways than won.

A soft-drink manufacturer named his beverage A-1, and advertised it as A-1-derful drink. Nothing has been heard of it since.

An old oral riddle ran: Two men ate oysters on a bet. One ate 99, but the other ate 100 and won. Question: Did the winner eat one or two more than the loser?

A more venerable riddle double-punned on the lowest two cardinal numbers. Q. What is the difference between Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth? A. One was a *wonder*, the other a *Tudor*.

The ordinal equivalents of these numbers are also susceptible to wordplay.

A fencer's first consideration is for his second.

The number *two* is number one in the frequency of such punning. Gertrude Stein, who rose to fame via a-rose-is-a-rose-is-a-rose and similar verbalisms, once wrote an article on the interplay of *two*, *to* and *too*. She was just another one of a long line of punmongers who have toyed with these sound-alikes, including Shakespeare. I once described a well-known musician who "wore his hair two inches and two months too long," only to discover later that he wore a wig. For reasons not too hard to understand, these homonyms have always found favor with children as well as adults.

The question is not whether to pun or not to pun with these homonyms, but how to avoid overplaying them. One of the definitions in my *Comic Dictionary* illustrates this danger: "A vacation is a rest of two weeks that are too short, and after which you are too tired to return to work and too broke not to." Oddly enough, this definition is one of the most widely quoted from the book.

A similar case of putting *two* and *to* together is the story of an elderly lady whose train pulled up at a station shortly after lunch. Sticking her head out of the window, she asked, "How long does this train stop here?" "Two to two to two-two," said the porter as he hurried away. "Poor fellow," she uttered, "he must be demented. He thinks he's the engine."

A close call in more ways than one is illustrated in the tale of a baseball game which was being umpired by an undersized fellow. A huge player was at the plate, and an equally big catcher behind him. The count was one and one. The little umpire watching the pitch sizzle across a corner, yelled "Two!" "Two what?" snarled the catcher, brandishing his mask in the umpire's face. "Yeah, two what?" growled the batter, raising his bat. The umpire looked up from one brute to the other. "Too close to tell!" he said.

Another story comes out of alphabetics. A chemistry teacher called upon a student for the formula for water. "Yes, sir," said the student, "HIJKLMNO." "What on earth are you talking about?" cried the teacher. "But you distinctly told us yesterday, sir," replied the young man, "that the formula for water is H to O."

The technique of linkage also widens the range of *two-punning*. A wit once wrote a story about a waiter who served an order for oyster stew, then brought oysters two, whereas the customer had ordered oysters too. Similar but simpler is the twisted proverb: Every oyster has his day, sometimes stew.

Closely related to numerical epigrams and proverbs is the *numerical definition*. This is the verbal explanation of a number or the numerical explanation of a word. Probably the best-known specimen comes from Ambrose Bierce, a good wit who was seldom in good humor. He defined marriage misogamously as the condition of a

community that consists of a master, a mistress, and two slaves, making in all—two.

Among the several types of such definitions, one explains a number, another defines a word in terms of a number or numbers, and still another combines both of these types.

forty. The age when a man begins to get thin on the top, and a woman begins to get fat on the bottom.

motorist. A person who can drive fifty miles an hour even if he drives only ten minutes.

thirteen. An unlucky number if you only have dinner enough for twelve.

Numerese plays with ordinal numbers as well as with cardinals. A favorite among these is *fifth*, the alcoholic fifth of a gallon. As with other comparable sayings, there is usually numerical counterpoint.

Almost as essential as a fourth at bridge is a fifth at a poker game.

Though a fifth will go into three with none left over, there may be one to carry.

Some men celebrate the Fourth of July by buying a fifth on the third.

Then there was the man whose wife presented him with quadruplets. So he went out and bought a fifth!

The alcoholic fifth may also be set against some other fifth, like the musical fifth of the standard scale. Jazzman Eddie Condon once cracked, "The difference between jazz musicians is that bop men flat their fifths whereas Dixielanders drink theirs."

Numerical English has its favorite words as well as numbers. A good example is the colloquial expression *going on* which stands for something close in number, like nearing a specified age.

A father was bewildered by the goings-on of his teenage daughter. In response to a visitor's question, he said, "She's fifteen, going on twenty."

Often enough such wit takes the form of numerical analogy.

She has two chins, going on three.

She has four children, going on five.

The little girl who was once five going on six has grown up and is now 30 going on 29.

Another weapon in the arsenal of numbers is *numerical grouping*. A restaurant in the South displays this sign:

We Are Reducing Our 75-Cent Hamburgers from 60 Cents to 50 Cents.

A doctor told a film star, "You are run down and need a change." "A change?" repeated the actress. "Do you know that during the past two years I've had three husbands, five cars, seven maids, four press agents, six cooks, two divorces, three jewelry robberies, and eleven landlords? What other changes do you suggest?"

A cluster of numbers may be exploited ingeniously in any situation. A hotel guest was awakened by the telephone, the desk clerk inquiring, "I've forgotten, sir, whether you wanted to be called at seven or eight." "Good Heavens!" he cried, "I said six! What time is it now?" The desk clerk replied, "Nine, sir."

Many a *numerical slip* is made inadvertently in speech and writing, especially in typographical errors. One news item announced that "thirsty per cent of the men reported that they had consumed no beer during the week covered." Even more curious was the notice from a police department which stated: "Eleven patients escaped

from the Blank State Hospital. Thirteen patients were recovered."

Not all numerical mistakes are slips. The local chapter of the Ladies' Aid Society in a small Southern town decided to bring a little sunshine into the state prison by writing cheerful letters to the inmates. One elderly lady was uncertain how she should go about addressing a man she knew only by a string of numbers. Finally she figured out a way to show her friendly feelings. "Dear 274985," she wrote. "May I call you 274?"

One type of humorous English called *matrimonial mathematics* satirizes marriage in mathematical terms, including numbers. It goes without saying that the wife gets more than her share of the marriage portion in such satire. Matrimonial mathematics makes her the bitter half, whereas it gives the poor husband double duties and half the rights. By the same token matrimony becomes a feminine plot to add to a man's responsibilities and subtract from his rights. A less misogynous approach describes matrimony as something multiplied by two, where your joys are divided and your troubles multiplied.

Matrimonial mathematics also properly embraces sayings that toy with the term *better half*.

What happens to a man if his wife is his better half and he marries twice?

Your half-brother is still your half-brother after he takes a better half.

A man's wife may be his better half, but it's her mother who is usually the whole thing.

Two misunderstood husbands were consoling each other at a bar. "Is it true," asked the first, "that you and your wife are no longer one?" "That's right," admitted the other. "We're not one, we're ten. She's one—and I'm nought."

Another numerical story tells about a couple of Hollywood youngsters, the children of movie stars, who were discussing their parents. Boasted one: "I have four daddies by my mama, and three mamas by my daddy."

And now two concluding items to round out this chapter. The first is an illustrated proverb satirically set in numerical English.

Money does not buy happiness: the man with 20 million dollars is no happier than the man with 19 million.

The second is a situation showing the nonsense of numerical English.

An applicant for a job presented so glowing an account of himself as to arouse the suspicion of the interviewer. "How long did you work in your last job?" he asked. "Twenty years," said the applicant. "How old are you?" was the next question. "Thirty," said the applicant. A smile of distrust flitted over the face of the interviewer. "Then how could you have worked there for twenty years?" he asked. The other replied simply, "Overtime."

ADVERTISESE

One girl says to another: "I met a marvelous man last night. He said that my hair quivered with subtle softness, my skin had the velvety texture of angels, and my eyes sparkled with divine laughter." "He sounds like a wonderful guy," agreed her friend. "What does he do for a living?" "He told me," replied the other, "that he writes advertising copy."

This dialogue satirizes the exaggeration of advertese. At the other end of merchandising lies the ridicule of technological jargon. The salesgirls in a leading department store are now being taught Madison Avenue methods of selling. One of them, in charge of the umbrella department, was full of ardor for the new system. When a customer questioned whether an umbrella would leak, she explained, "This umbrella is impermeable, madam. It's especially constructed to stand any hydrostatic pressure." The customer looked bewildered. "But I never go out in weather like that," she said.

Between these two bits of satire lies a pervasive world of English. Advertising bombards us from all sides, from radio and television to billboards and car cards, from direct mail and novelties to newspapers and magazines. It would be more bearable if there were more humor in it, just as we can put up with a long speech if there is enough laughter to leaven it.

One important reason for the insufficiency of humorous advertising is the absence of humorous research. All the large agencies have libraries to serve their staffs and clients, with everything indexed to numerous volumes, periodicals and vertical files. Everything except humor. While it is true that leading cartoonists have long ago made the grade, their opposite numbers, the humorists, are still *persona non grata*. Here and there a Max Shulman, Don Herold and Stephen Potter are hired to copy-write, but humorous writers generally are unwelcome. The history of advertising is full of golden rewards won by advertisers unafraid of humorous copy.

Advertese occupies a special role in English. The term is used here not in its jargon sense for the specialized vocabulary of the advertising fraternity but in its restricted sense of gay, whimsical and humorous advertising. Because it is the only department of linguicomedy which attempts to work out practical problems in selling, advertese is usually combined with pictorial elements.

The first fundamental of the subject is *alphabetic pictography*. Our Roman alphabet has often been sketched out of human figures, animals, plants and other things following the shapes of individual capital letters. In advertese the usual practice is to picturize isolated letters within words, especially in headline spelling where a safety razor may be made to stand for the letter T or a pair of scissors for X.

The most pictographic of all letters is O. It is used to represent an advertised tire or ring, and in the spelling of *clock* is often converted into the face of a clock. The O in *doughnut* is commonly pictured as a doughnut, and in a cigarette ad it may become a smoke ring in the spelling of *smoke*. The double O too is a favorite, especially in headings for products like sunglasses and binoculars.

Sometimes this double letter appears as a pair of eyes in the spelling of *look*.

Different articles have been turned into writing materials to spell out letters, especially flexible items like fishing rods, belts and ties, and even dentrifices with paste coming out of their tubes. Straight articles like pens have been used as the vertical, horizontal and slanted strokes in the letters of words like *VALUE*.

Pictographics covers a multitude of other advertising effects. Some companies employ special styles of lettering to suggest their services, like the airline whose printed name always gives the reader a feeling of flight. Others incorporate the product in the lettering of the brand name. Photographs of cigarettes have served as typographic ascenders and descenders—the upward and downward parts of letters like *b*, *d*, *k* and *y*. It is the practice among some firms whose names or products include the word *king* to set a small crown above the *i* instead of a dot.

Another area of pictography deals with the *corporate symbol*, a device intended to fix the company image in the public mind. One large company symbolizes its product by a scallop spelled with the name SHELL upon it. A competing gasoline company tries to implant its product firmly on the viewer's mind by displaying V-shaped bars topped by the word CHEVRON. Such advertising symbols revert to the heraldic devices of the past, proving that as time goes forward, changes go backward.

Advertising characters too unite the verbal with the pictorial. The Chesapeake & Ohio Railway's *Chessie* is, next to Lewis Carroll's counterpart from Cheshire, the best-known American feline. Unlike Borden's bovine *Elsie* she identifies the service by her clipped name.

Advertese playing on names is used to trade-mark the

bearded Smith Brothers of cough-drop fame—Trade and Mark. Another less durable set appeared when the Trico Windshield Wipers gave birth to a pair of advertising twins and called them *Two Little Squirts*.

Sometimes the name given to advertising characters does more than fix the identity of the product. Such was the case with Suchard chocolates whose ambiguous Swiss name was often mispronounced Suck-hard. The problem was solved by designing a trademark creature and christening her Sue Shard.

In legal terminology, advertising characters are and/or figments of the imagination. It may be set down as a good rule that creatures fashioned out of word-and-picture are more recollective than word-or-picture specimens. A leading firm of corrugated box manufacturers dresses its cartoon figurine in cartons and calls her Cora Gated. Johnnie Walker blended Scotch whisky plays on the name of its walking figure of a man without otherwise identifying the product.

Less extensive than pun-names are alliterative characters. Pete, the Premier Prune, recalls Don Marquis by his slogan, "I'll never be an old soak!" Another child of printer's ink was Peter Pain, the devilish imp behind muscular aches that were rubbed out via a Ben-Gay rub-in.

Alliteration is merely one of the many techniques in linguicomedy that permeate advertising. *Grouping* is another which has been adroitly exploited in many ways. One advertising agency has built a sustained national campaign around the juxtaposition of genuine postmarks both in caption and copy. Combinations of post-office stampings are virtually endless, and topical events like elections and holidays can easily be made to fit or follow any appeal. Sample:

CLOTHIER (W.VA.) SELLS (ARIZ.) SHORT

(OKLA.) STOUT (OHIO) GUY (KY.) NEW
(W.VA.) SPRING (TEX.) SUIT (N.C.)

Initialese is a formula which has functioned considerably in recent years as a mark of identification. Among the earliest national advertisers was PM whiskey which blended it with grouping. "PM . . . Pleasing Millions . . . the Perfect Mixer . . . Positively Marvellous taste." More recently Liggett & Myers with their L&M cigarette, and Seagram's VO Canadian whisky have followed suit. None of these uses seems to have caught the public fancy as much as L.S./M.F.T.—"Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco." The riddle or code quality of these letters was enigmatic enough to popularize them and lead to many an amusing variation.

While advertising was slowly growing up in the 19th century, the *slogan* played a conspicuous role in political parties and other groups. But beginning with this century advertising became the chief locale of the slogan. All types of products and services took a fancy to it, especially liquors.

Champagne: Mumm's the word for champagne.

Scotch Whisky: There's nothing like a dram of Drambuie.

Blended Whiskey: Hunter—First over the bars.

Gin: Gordon's—The party spirit.

Vodka: Smirnoff—It leaves you breathless.

Vermouth: Don't stir without Noilly Prat.

Wine: B & G Sparkling Burgundy—The wine that rises to the occasion.

Tobacco products give liquor strong competition. A number of slogans have been typed in other chapters, like the "treat instead of a treatment" of Old Gold cigarettes. The extended paraphrase of happy-go-lucky

by Lucky Strike cigarettes is another familiar catchword: "Be Happy—Go Lucky!"

For many years the sloganed "Call for Philip Morris" exploited the phonetic device of a bellhop. Admiration Cigar puffs its product as "the cigar that always wins your admiration." Barking Dog, a pipe tobacco, favors the proverb, "Barking Dog Never Bites."

The familiarity of tobacco sayings occasionally creates slogan lore. One girl became popular by changing her brand of cigarettes. She used to walk a mile, but now she satisfies.

A famous saying was twisted to advantage by a brewery in Mexico. It paraphrased "The Beer That Made Milwaukee Famous" by claiming its drink was "The Beer That Made Milwaukee Jealous."

A Pennsylvania shoe chain named Farr's announces in all its ads, "Better shoes by Farr." This is another case of history repeating itself. Over a century earlier a London tobacconist by the same name used to advertise, "The best tobacco by Farr." A leading competitor, having lost much trade through this catchword, regained many of his customers by fighting slogan with slogan. He placarded the neighborhood proclaiming, "Far better tobacco than the best tobacco by Farr."

Playing on the name of the advertiser is standard practice. The motto of a New Orleans department store promises: "There's no place like Holmes." The original saying, differently altered, serves a national magazine: "There's no place like American Home for results."

Playing on the name of the product is equally prevalent. A safe-builder slogans "If it's Mosler, it's safe." An awning manufacturer advertises "Just a shade better."

Place slogans follow similar formulas of wordplay. Chester, Pennsylvania, announces "What Chester Makes Makes Chester," while less than fifty miles away Tren-

ton, New Jersey, proclaims "What Trenton Makes, the World Takes." More specific was the boast of Danbury, Connecticut, once the country's hat center: "Danbury Crowns Them All." A public utility in Cincinnati publicizes "Make your move to the city that's on the move" whereas nearby Dayton propagandizes "You have a Date with Dayton."

Proverbs and idioms are the source of most slogans, and most of these are verbal twists that follow the techniques described in this book. A familiar specimen serves Morton's salt: "When it rains it pours." Another is the notation of Coca-Cola: "Sign of Good Taste." Sometimes an appeal attains so wide a popularity that it turns into a trade adage, like the beauty salon saying: "If your hair isn't becoming to you, you should be coming to us." Then there are favorite slogan words, like *rest*. Bed and sofa manufacturers take to it in wordplay like "The rest is easy" and "For the rest of the world." The most publicized specimen used to be "Rest assured . . . on the New York Central."

Every one of the many techniques of humor produces an unceasing flow of samples. Rhyming is ubiquitous, a commonplace being "Eye it—Try it—Buy it." Some memorable brevities come to mind at once: "Smiles at Miles" (tires), "Motorists Wise, Simoniz" (car polish), and "The Ham What Am."

Another leading technique is *reversing*, a banality of recent years being Serutan, "Nature's spelled backwards." One newspaper slogans "All the news most of the time—most of the news all the time." An abrasive products firm provides "Making better products . . . to make your products better." A paper manufacturer headlines "Paper does so much for people, and CHAMPION people do so much for paper."

Whatever the technique used, the advertising slogan

is designed as an applied proverb, adage or idiom, and tends to obey the same laws. Man lives by catchwords, but they become meaningless clichés without impact unless mirrored in piquant and pungent wit. As brevity is their dress, so variety is their spice—variety in the form of playful twists.

Coca-Cola's slogan, "The Pause That Refreshes," may serve as a sample. A television commercial has been described as the pause that depresses, a lunch hour as the pause that refreshes, a cheer as the applause that refreshes, and a private bath establishment specializing in massage has even publicized itself as "The paws that refresh."

Complete sentences no less than phrases or clauses give rise to turns of wit, like the car slogan: "Ask the man who owns one."

Every family needs at least two cars; ask the man who owns one.

Cars are a public menace; ask the man who doesn't own one.

Such is the homage paid to the better slogans. They breed imitation as readily as idioms and proverbs do, with each clever version embedding the product more firmly in the public mind. But this homage is double-edged. If the advertised product does not find acceptance as true or if it grows out of date, the slogan will work against rather than for it. If the product has merit, it can only gain by repeated parody whether the parody be mere wordplay or biting satire. In such cases Oscar Wilde's epigram is applicable: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."

The curious fact is that whereas advertising has taken giant strides in recent decades, sloganese has virtually remained the same static adjunct of copy. As advertising

goes today, relatively fewer slogans pull their weight, which is not so much to proclaim the virtues of a product as to identify it easily. For the test of a good slogan is its degree of familiarity, and the test of its familiarity is the frequency with which it breeds variations on its theme.

There are ways to stimulate variety in the unchanging language of a slogan and thus give it greater currency. One way is to adapt it to the gag panel, the most popular form of contemporary comedy, the cartoon that pictures a situation and carries a gagline quoting one of its characters. By using the advertising slogan as the gagline under a series of pantomime panels, we play pictorial variations on a verbal theme. And thus we convert a static saying into a dynamic one.

Another way to dynamize a slogan as the caption of a cartoon or offbeat photograph, is to use it instead of copy. In this case, since the slogan alone carries the message, it must mention the name of the product. The inventive and dexterous copywriter should have little difficulty in discovering other means of dramatizing slogans through the techniques set down in this book.

Brand names make up a prolific department of advertisement. Every branch of humorous English influences these trademarked products, and every form of linguistic comedy, from quips to stories, contributes examples.

Henry Morton Robinson once wrote an article around a punniac named Herkimer Howe. In it Howe toyed with the brand names of American cigarettes: "Once in a dreamy, punsive mood, Herkimer observed, 'A cigarette cough is the hack that precedes the hearse.' That was raleigh a lucky strike. Few of his puns are as Chesterfieldian as that, and often they just come out pell-mell."

A professor disillusioned with the results of an exam

he had given his class, told the students they reminded him of Sanka because "97 per cent of the active ingredient has been removed from the bean."

In an elementary school a class was studying Africa. When the teacher asked how ivory is used, one small boy eagerly held up his hand. "Most ivory," he said, "is used for soap."

A woman looking over a variety of thermometers in a drug store finally made her selection. "I'll take this fahrenheit one," she told the druggist. "I know that's a good brand."

Another scene takes place in a restaurant where a young couple who had recently met were getting to know each other. The conversation turned to literature. "What do you like to read best?" she asked. "I go for 'Li'l Abner' and 'Terry and the Pirates,'" he answered. "Don't you like such things as O. Henry?" she inquired, hoping he was interested in good literature. "Nope," he replied, "the nuts get in my teeth."

The Brand Names Foundation, an association of manufacturers devoted to the promotion of their trade-marked products, slogans its causes through wordplay: "You're satisfied most with a Brand that's made a Name for itself."

Brand names are commonly playnames although seldom recognized as such. The simplest of all wordplay is often an everyday advertised product, like Toastmaster, Lucky Strike or Whirlpool. No one thinks of Fab as the clipped form of fabulous, or Sanka as a play on the words sans (without) and caffein. Studies made on hundreds of brand names have come up with all sorts of plausible and questionable conclusions: the best ones are supposed to be easy to read, remember and pronounce; compel attention, suggest quality or impart status to the owner; be free from objectionable connotations; indicate what the product is or will do, and many other opinions about

impact, taste and credibility more honored in the breach than in the performance. A more profitable project than many of these studies would be to make up a list of national brand names each of which exemplifies a different type of English, like alphabetic, syllabic, abbreviate, etc. And then to correlate this with another list of the same names classifying them under techniques of linguistic comedy like joining, cutting, punning, etc.

The titles of *house organs* are based on the same verbal formulas as brand names, and a few examples may not be out of place here. In most cases the title is a play on the company name, like *The Field Glass*, from Marshall Field & Co.; *Generally Speaking*, from General Tire & Rubber Co.; *The Kraftsman*, from Kraft Foods Co. Sometimes the house magazine is given a playname taken from the company's product. *Watch Word*, from Elgin National Watch Co.; *Banknotes*, from the First National Bank of Miami; *The Lamp Lighter*, from the Lamp Division of General Electric Co. A third method of naming publications is to suggest the company or its services by association: *Long Lines*, from American Telephone & Telegraph Co.; *Going Places*, from American Express Co.; *The Inside Track*, from Southern Pacific Co.

As a leading form of applied humor, playful advertense is the most neglected field of research. Yet it is fraught with vast potentials of gain and good. An agency, let us say, wishes to promote a brand of typewriter. Whether it makes a general appeal applying to the machine as a whole, or a specific one applying to its operation or parts, the agency is usually faced with the task of exploiting an idea also applicable to competing brands. Unlike all other researchers, the humor consultant solves the problem in a new way, in an approach that individualizes the typewriter while identifying it with a pleasurable association. He may slant it toward a new trend in popular comedy

which advertising agencies traditionally ignore long after the trend has been established by newspaper syndication. Or he may tackle the basic idea behind typewriter comedy which is spelling, and propose a campaign built upon it.

One ad might be written in a mock lipogram (the subject is discussed in the chapter on Alphabetese) where all the *e*'s are replaced by *x*'s, something aftxr this stylx. The spelling trick of course must be controlled so as not to arouse reader interest while diverting attention from the product. Another ad might be written in "Chinese" spelling with all the *r*'s replaced by *l*'s, the humorous appeal being plovided by misspelled explesions. Obviously, the variations are many.

Advertising has long ago discovered that the judicious use of research brings remunerative results. Why then does it continue to pass up the rewarding fruit of humorous research waiting to be plucked?

NOVELTY ENGLISH

Novelty English is a miscellany of clever tricks with letters and words intended to amuse or, in advertising, to call attention to the image of a product. There are two broad divisions of novelty English. One covers typographical effects where the shapes of letters and words are dominant and unrelated to their sounds or ideas. The other covers tricky arrangements of letters and words involving their sounds and ideas. Between these two classes lie whimsical constructions mingling or juggling phonetics and pictorial forms and meanings.

The potentials of novelty English may be suggested by a simple example. The simile *as American as apple pie* can be turned into a rebus by substituting for the word pie the picture of a pie. The word pie may also be replaced by π , the symbol for the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter. In one case the effect is achieved by a picture, in the other by a symbol, but both are specimens of novelty English.

Linguistic pictures come under the classification of pictographics and have been discussed in the chapter on Advertese. As with other types of linguicomedy, the advertising profession has merely surface-scratched these images, unaware of their rich resources.

Another area of novelty English is *space writing*, a form of visual comedy dealing with the whimsical junc-

tion and separation of letters and words. Intimate buddies, for example, may be written down as veryclosefriends.

S p a c e s stand for the wide open spaces, *m a n* is a spaceman, *l e g a l* is a legal separation, and *f a r h o m e* means far away from home.

Runin sentences are a stock device in space writing where all the letters and words are run together.

Seehowalinelookswithoutspacesbetweenthewords.

Advertising takes occasional advantage of this device to attract attention. One ad for microfilm, proclaiming its benefits as a spacesaver, ran a caption:

How To Find S P A C E In Your Library

Another ad, announcing a motion picture, was printed without benefit of capitals or punctuation like this:

ifyouwanttoseewhatawomanwithsixmartinis inhercandoto
picturestarscareerdontmissthispictureatthenationalthea-
ter

Such specimens are generally short and seldom abuse comic license unduly. The *reductio ad absurdissimum* of spacewriting is illustrated in the story of Professor Aristotle Herringbone in the chapter on Compounds.

A verse honored by many a variant contrasts courtship past and present.

When grandmama had suitors, they wooed with
bashful heart,
And when they sat together, they sat this far
apart.
Granddaughter now has boyfriends who greet her
with a kiss,
And when they sit together, they sit realcloselikethis.

Long before Einstein discovered the space-time continuum, comedy employed spacewriting to indicate intervals of time as well as distance. A nonsense story tells about a man who entered a tavern moving his head slowly from side to side and muttering, "Tick—tock—tick—tock—tick—tock. . . ." The barman, too shrewd to fall for the act, ignored him but the fellow kept on weaving his head and muttering, "Tick—tock—tick—tock. . . ." Finally, the man behind the bar gave up. "Okay, you win," he said. "What's the gimmick?" "What gimmick?" replied the other. "I'm a clock. Tick—tock—tick—tock. . . ." "If you're a clock, then tell me the time," the barman humored him. "It's six-fifteen," answered the fellow. "Wrong!" returned the barman, "it's six-thirty." "Oh, my God!" exclaimed the other startled. "I must be slow. Ticktockticktockticktock!"

Related to spacewriting are the *shaped words* which outline the objects and ideas they represent, within the limits of rigid typography. Some words, like *extend* and *stretch*, are e-x-p-a-n-d-e-d through hyphens and dashes. The words *hyphen* and *hyphenation* are written hy-phen and hy-phen-a-tion in humorese. Other words are given the shapes of the particular persons or things they stand for, like CAMEL.

Shaped words are allied to the figured whimsies of shaped verse like staircase rhymes, and shaped prose like novelty epitaphs. They differ generally from *positional writing* in which a word, phrase or saying is suggested by the relation or arrangement of letters and words.

In positional writing *re-re* represents repaired. *Bangff* means starting off with a bang. *Ssssssssse* is Tennessee. And *wowolfol* is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Many patterns make up this class of novelty English and many techniques are involved. *Reverse writing* is

one of them, including mirror writing. Spelling tricks are included, as: *dlihC* is a backward child, *rac* is a car in reverse, and *gnikool* is looking backward. Included also are other directional effects, like lines arranged to be read up instead of down.

at the bottom and end up at the top like this
like a ride in an elevator where you always start
a good specimen of reverse writing should be

Upside-down writing is another type of positional writing. The occasional prose specimen may be a word printed in tricky fashion, like YOGA with the Y printed upside down as if it were standing on its head. Or an advertisement like that recently run by the Australian National Travel Association headlined: *What's it like Down Under?* with illustration and text upside down. Sometimes it is printed below an ingenious heading. A caption like "Recipe for Upside-Down Cake" will carry the list of ingredients and directions upside down. The text-matter under a caption like "For Men Only" will follow suit and probably comment upon the curiosity of women.

Out of 100,000 feminine readers of this heading addressed to men, 99,999 will turn this page upside down to read this. The other one is probably illiterate.

Zigzag writing belongs to this class of typocomedy. The headline covering a hurdles race was once set in two lines, bringing to the mind's eye of the reader the barriers of the course.

Wins	Race	Record
Smith	Hurdles	In Time

There are other types of positional writing which require novel typographic composition. Such whimsies lead inevitably to staircase rhymes where verses turn into sight gags. They are described later on in this chapter.

The universal technique of substitution operates widely in novelty English. It is especially evident in *logograms*, the symbols used to represent words. In American humor the logogram \$ for *dollar* is the equivalent of the £ for *pound* in British humor. Thus, we might say that a fortunehunter is an Englishman who marries for £ove, or an American who marries for FUND\$.

The dollar sign has always played a major role in American history but a minor one in American humor. In humorous English it acts chiefly as an alphabetical substitute for the letter S.

The advertising profession plays with words like \$ale, \$pecials, \$avings and related spellings. In other fields too the same substitution takes place. A book criticizing the commercialism of American sports bore the title: \$PORT\$, HEROICS and HYSTERICS.

Walter Winchell, an exponent of word jugglery, often resorts to dollar-sign spelling. Las Vegas becomes La\$ Vega\$, Santa Claus becomes \$anta Clau\$, and divorce alimony a \$ettlement.

This symbol is sometimes a sign of satiric sayings as well as money, like describing it as an S that has been double-crossed. Most of these epigrams are based on the simple substitution of logograms, but every now and then an acute saying emerges.

When Congress is in \$e\$\$ion look for an increase in the national debt.

\$ucce\$\$ always ends with twice as many dollars as it starts.

There was formerly a comic tradition in American journalism that articles on money spelled the "S's" as "\$'s." One specimen ran for years in the small weekly newspapers throughout the land, somewhat after this fashion:

There i\$ a little matter that \$ome of our \$ub\$criber\$ have \$eemingly forgotten entirely. \$ome of them have made u\$ many promi\$e\$ but have not kept them. It i\$ a very important matter—mo\$t nece\$\$ary in our bu\$i-ne\$\$\$. We are very mode\$t and do not like to \$peak about \$uch remi\$\$ne\$\$\$.

The dollar sign seldom breaks away from alphabetical to numerical substitution. A man dining with his wife in a restaurant, turned to her and said, "Remember, dear, we have to leave here at \$10.30."

In addition to logograms, *novelty spelling* exploits a variety of nimble alphabetics. The old English *s* is sometimes playfully revived in jocular literature as an *f* which it resembled.

"I wouldn't worry too much if your fon makef mud pief," faid the pfychiatrif, "or even if he trief to eat them. That'f quite normal." "Well, I don't think it if," objected the woman, "and neither doef hif wife."

Another novelty is the substitution of words by repetition of the same letters. *Bees* and *teas* may be spelled *bb* and *tt*, *use* by *uuu*, and *seas* or *sees* by *cccc*. Formerly an adult device, this has now become a juvenile and adolescent pastime.

Matchless are her gray-green ii,
And she speaks and writes with eee,
But I doubt me if she can be yyyy
For she dotes on carrots and ppppp.

Capitals and *small letters* are also manipulated typographically. They are sometimes turned into shaped

words, as in CAPITAL gains, or CAPITAL vs. labor. Henry James once characterized a woman in upper and lower case characters by observing that she felt in *italics* and thought in CAPITALS.

Fred Allen, the wittiest of radio comedians, always used to type out his letters in lower case. He followed the fashion of Don Marquis's immortal cockroach archie who had neither the strength nor weight to depress the shift key necessary to type out capital letters. When Allen was asked why he never used the capitals on his typewriter, he answered, "i have never learned to shift for myself."

Another anti-capitalist, e. e. cummings, the american poet, once explained his pet aversion: "i use capitals ONLY for emphasis, after all, that's what they were invented for weren't they?"

The writings of archie, allen and cummings ran counter to such upper-case letterplay as the sign at a research institute that read: LABORatory, not laborATORY. They also countertyped, both in opposite and parallel senses of the word, the self-contradicting sign: Never use CAPITALS!

The *call letters* of radio and television stations have been changed into media of communication like the stations themselves. The Federal Communications Commission divides such call letters into two four-letter groups, those in the East beginning with W, and those in the West beginning with K. While most stations carry alphabetic clusters that defy letterplay, others resemble words like KING, KORN, KASH, WHAT, WHEN, WHIZ. There's a WIND in windy Chicago, and a KITE in San Antonio. And in Arizona, where temperatures soar above winds and kites, sweltering radio fans have stations KOLD and KOOL.

Time magazine, ever alert to linguistic comedy, once

wrote up an amusing news story about these four-letter words, which led a waggish reader to complain in call-letterese about its omissions. "KAST a KWIK look at the KEEN KROP I KROW about," he mocked, as he went on a cumulative binge. The editor replied in kindred vein, giving the reader a WARM WELLCOME because "his entry has KLAS and WINS in a WALK."

Behind one large class of verbal tricks lies a prodigious history. Long before English was spoken, other languages played with the letters of their alphabets to form twistwit of many kinds. The most diverse of these linguistic diversions was the *anagram*, and it is still universally popular. The anagram is nothing more than the formation of a word or phrase from another by transposing its letters, like on—no, add—dad, and take—Kate.

There was once a horse-lover, for example, who would never eat beefsteak containing the tenderloin because porterhouse anagrammed into *our pet horse*.

The anagram has always been a favorite device for turning proper names into pen names, Voltaire's being a celebrated instance. It has also been used to devise epithets. During World War II the anagram of A. Hitler was *The Liar*.

The anagram definition is a species of lexicography that explains a word in terms of its twisted letters. Astronomer is defined as *moon starrer*. Revolution means *to love ruin*, and facetiousness stands for the *finest o' sauces*. *Best in prayer* is the anagram for Presbyterian, and *he's a true men's counter* for the census enumerator.

Mixed writing is a nonce-word for anagrammese, especially for self-descriptive words like *mix*, *scramble*, *jumble*, and the like. *Marigare*, for example, stands for a mixed marriage, and *dki* for a mixed-up kid. By the

same token *belmarcs* is the scrambled spelling of scramble.

Wordplayers have turned the anagram into popular games like *Scrabble*, but the *acrostic* is less convertible. In this type of letterplay, words are so arranged that the first, last, or other letters in each line of a composition spell out a word, phrase or sentence. The most famous acrostic in English is the origin of the word NEWS from the first letters of the four directions—North, East, West, South.

Lewis Carroll wrote an acrostic verse beginning with "A boat, beneath a sunny sky," the initial letters of the lines spelling out the name of ALICE PLEASANCE LIDDELL, the original Alice.

There are several kinds of acrostics. If the initial and final letters form words, it is a double acrostic. If the middle letters also do, it is a triple acrostic. If a word is spelled out by the first letter of the first line, the second letter of the second line, etc., it is a cross acrostic.

As a form of puzzlewit, acrostics were highly valued ages ago when the alphabet was not the common possession of everyone and taken for granted. They have shown astonishing powers of survival, as in the contemporary literary puzzle misnamed the double-croctic. With the rise of multi-word names for corporations and government bureaus in recent decades, acrostics have taken a turn toward acronyms described in the chapter on Abbrevese.

The *palindrome* is a word, phrase or sentence whose letters read the same in reverse order. A word palindrome is spelled the same forwards and backwards, like bob, eye, did; noon, poop, toot; refer, level, radar; re-viver, deified, rotator. The word palindrome itself is not a palindrome but *emordnilap* spelled backwards.

Palindromic sayings can make no use of palindromic words except in the middle. They employ words which spell other words backwards, reversible word-combinations like was—saw, diaper—repaid, live—evil. The most famous of all palindromic sayings in English is the Napoleonism: “Able was I ere I saw Elba.”

In English palindromics all speak English, not only foreigners like Napoleon but even Adam himself who, upon meeting his side-kick Eve, introduced himself, “Madam, I’m Adam.”

Most palindromic specimens are not constructed out of a series of words and their reversibles, but run backwards and forwards regardless of verbal units or punctuation. Half a century ago a familiar reversible ran: “A man, a plan, a canal—Panama!”

Clever generalizations are rare and short, as: Live not on evil. Most specimens are too forced or contrived, as: Name no one man. Sums are not set as a test on Erasmus.

Palindromic dialogues are uncommon, the best being none too good. “Was it a cat I saw?” “No, miss, it is Simon.”

A modest fortune awaits the palindromist who writes a usable slogan for a national advertiser.

Another perpetual source of verbal novelties are *shaped whimsies*. These are odd typographic effects, ranging from individual words to multi-linear designs. They are less a matter of writing than writhing, being set in geometric forms, like triangles and circles, or given the outlines of everyday things, like bells and umbrellas.

She		This
Was		Like
The		Up At
Kind		Look
	Of A You	
	Girl	

You
are looking
at a shaped whimsy
in the form of a triangle.
You have probably seen one before
but there is something about it that forces you,
once you've begun, to read it down to the very end.

Staircase rhymes make up the verse department of shaped whimsies. They are verses whose words or lines are put together in an arrangement that suggests or pictures their contents. The name derives from the early specimens which were set as a series or flight of stairs.

Though many poets balk at staircase rhyme,
It has its place
It surely saves you lots of time and work
To
fill
up
space.

Staircase rhyming became a craze half a century ago with newspapers and comic magazines giving it considerable play. It came in much earlier, one of the early specimens being the pictographic pun constructed by Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland* where the *Tale of the Mouse* appeared typographically as a tail.

Tricky rhymesters who are averse to prose because they are happier in rhyme, a feeling not always shared by their readers, find typocomedy limitless. One trick makes use of upside-down or downside-up effects.

There was once a most charming young miss
Who considered her ice-skating bliss;
But one day, alack!
Her skates, they were slack,
And she ended up something like this.

Another of the many graphic tricks in staircase rhyming is to present an up-and-down effect by writing the terminal word or line vertically.

"I gave up Jonah," said the whale
With scowl and frown,
"And now I know you cannot keep
A good man D
O
W
N."

The *rebus* is a form of puzzlewit made up of pictures of objects together with signs which, by the sounds of their names, suggest syllables and words. Syllabic division, where two or more pictures stand for one word, is a basic factor in rebuses. For example, three consecutive pictures of a pen, a man, and a ship form a rebus for penmanship. The picture of a washing machine followed by another showing a bundle of wash marked "ONE TON" is a rebus for Washington.

The *educational rebus* was used during the 19th century in grade schools to teach pupils the facts of history and geography. One of the United States, for instance, would be pictured at the start of a rebus, followed by other pictures and brief snatches of text, the pictures having to be translated into words or letters. A page or two of such elements would summarize the economic geography of a state.

The *contest rebus* is a modern variation used to stir up interest in a new advertised product, to build up circulation for newspapers, or in other promotional schemes. This type is built out of pictures and letters together with plus and minus signs. There are no words or phrases. The solution lies in guessing the syllables and words

which stand for the illustrated objects, and by adding and subtracting the given letters. The contest rebus is often based on a central theme, like the brand name of a product, the names of famous persons, or the cities within a state.

Now mainly a pastime for children, the rebus once played an important role in the history of civilization. One of the early stages of writing words was to represent a picture which made clear the sound of the spoken word. Using English equivalents for ancient Egyptian, for example, the word *I* would be pictured by an eye, the word *be* by a bee. It was through such pictorial punning or sound-pictures, and not through the earlier representation of objects which led nowhere, that ancient man developed the alphabet.

The evolution of the rebus illuminates the strange affinity between the two chief inventions of man—language and humor. Beginning as the profoundest breakthrough in language, it was eventually turned into a plaything for children. It arose as a serious solution to difficult problems of communication only to end up as a frivolous trifle. Today the rebus is the Ultima Thule of novelty English, lying at the border where the written symbols for sounds revert to the language of pictures.

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